# Пространства на идентичност

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# THE BALKANS:

# A PLACE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

## *"NO LONGER ORIENTALS NOR YET EUROPEANS"*

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**Povzetek**: Pričujoči članek je, formalno rečeno, poskus prikaza raznolikosti teorij, prepričanj in misli o Balkanu kot primarno kulturni kategoriji. Njegov prvenstveni namen je prikazati položaj koncepta »balkanizem« v odnosu do konceptov »orientalizma« in »okcidentalizma«. Predhodno temu, članek vsebuje razlago definicij »orientalizma« in »okcidentalizma« ter uporabo ali ne-uporabo teh dveh terminov v različnih balkanskih državah in njim pripadajočih zgodovinah, s poudarkom na Bolgariji. Vseskozi besedilo poskušata avtorja nakazati številne (možne) analogije, relevantne probleme in koncepte z različnih humanističnih področij, kot so psihoanaliza, filozofija in antropologija. Namen tega je poudarjanje interdisciplinarnega sodelovanje v sferi humanistike, ki lahko doprinese k boljšemu razumevanju in predstavljanju določenih, bolj ali manj, kontroverznih tem.

**Ključne besede:** Balkan, balkanizem, orientalizem, okcidentalizem, interdisciplinarnost

**Abstract**: This article is, formally speaking, an attempt to show a diversity of theories, opinions and thoughts about the Balkans, primarily as a cultural category, and to picture a position of "Balkanism" as a concept in contrast to Orientalism and Occidentalism. Before going into that, we present definition(s) of Orientalism and Occidentalism and how these terms were or were not applied to different Balkan countries through history, especially Bulgaria. Throughout the text we point to several (possible) analogies, related problems and concepts from different areas, such as psychoanalysis, philosophy and anthropology, in order to show how cooperation between different areas can be beneficial for a better understanding and picturing of certain – more or less – controversial topics.

**Keywords:** Balkans, Orient, Occident, stereotypes, cultural identity

The starting point of talking about the Orient and Occident must be the acceptance of a distinction between East and West, not only geographically but also as two different cultural entities. The term "Orientalism" derives from Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978). This book is a critique of cultural representations which serve as a foundation of a Western

experience of the Orient. In this context, the word "Orientalism" stands for "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's place in European Western experience" (Aretov 2005), that is, in other words, "a specific style of thought based on the ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident" (ibid.), whereas "the Occident" can be described as a way of harbouring negative thoughts as regards the West, for example anti-European attitudes and an anti-Western sentiment as Aretov described (ibid.). This is actually a "counter-discourse" that developed in response to Orientalism and became an important component of anti-colonial nationalism.

Both discourses need the projection space of "the Other", while "the Other" always has a crucial part in building our own identity (Aretov 2012: 89)[1]. "The Other" can be imagined in different ways, often as a dangerous enemy on whom fears and insecurities can be projected (ibid.). This constitutes an attempt at eliminating differences with discourse, hoping that political reality would follow it. The Balkans, as the main toponym of this text, are constructed through a discourse that associates modernity and progress as presented by the term "the West". Consequently, their identity is structured in relation to a spatial-political order that comes from "the outside" (Bjelić & Savić 2005: 3). Europe has projected anxieties onto this "Other", its antithetical periphery (ibid.). In this context, we would like to point to one idea about the Balkans, an idea that was expressed by a prominent Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar, and concerns the function of the Balkans in modern Europe. In his opinion, the Balkans function as Europe's subconscious, as a place onto which Europe projects its own "traumas", everything that it is not willing to admit about itself (militarism, anti-feminism, violence etc.) (Žižek 2012).

In the past, for some time Bulgaria was one of the strongest countries on the Balkans and at the beginning of the 20th century, the idealization of the power Bulgaria had had in the past was still present among the public. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, anti-Western sentiments could be observed. This period was also the era of "national revival" and the construction of a Balkan nationalism. The Bulgarian national mythology saw Turks and Muslims as enemies and alien oppressors. Therefore, on the one hand, these were vehicles of occidentalistic tendencies (anti-Western tendencies), on the other hand, they orientalized what was more "East" than they were but betrays orientalistic tendencies. Bulgarian national thinkers of that time had been aware, that Bulgaria had been orientalised by "the West" and seen as less European, thus the Bulgarian elite tried to untangle the nation politically and culturally from its Ottoman past, insisting on its "European" past while at the same time

[1] See further for a possible analogy with Lacan's small and big a/A.

criticizing and rejecting Europe in an "occidentalistic" fashion (Neuburger 2010: 549-550). At the beginning of the 20th century, the demography of Bulgaria was quite colourful: people of "the Orient", Bulgarians in west-European dress, "uncivilized" Bulgarians, Turks, Gypsies, and Jews (ibid.).

Here we would like to make a brief foray into Mary Neuburger's thoughts about the medium of the fair through which she describes the process of Orientalism, identity and orientalizing "the Other", using her article "Fair Encounters: Bulgaria and the "West" at International Exhibitions from Plovdiv to St. Louis" (2010). We will focus on the Plovdiv fair of 1892. The main goal of the fair was to represent Bulgaria as a good student of Europe but participants wanted to sell it as unique and oriental. This fair as a medium showed what visitors imagined the Bulgarian nation to be and how they were actually involved in representing and manipulating Western readings of the nation. At the same time, they were trying to reimagine "the West" and to promote a market of "Oriental goods", expecting demand for such products. Participants thought that they just had to label goods as "oriental delicacy" in order for Europeans to try them and pay for them. The Plovdiv fair of 1892 was, in this context, used as a place to differentiate and construct what was Bulgarian, while the Ottoman past of the country was used as a source of blame for backwardness and a point of reference for progress (Cf. for this passage ibid., 550, 552, 557).

The paradoxical and counter-discourse tendencies displayed, with one side showing anti-western, Occidental tendencies and the other searching for something more "Oriental" than itself to legitimize being part of "the West", could point to the fact that not only Bulgaria but the entire Balkans gained the status of a liminal space by virtue of history, which means that they were neither here nor there and also in two places at the same time. This also means that not only Bulgaria but indeed all nations in the Balkan region have the tendency of orientalizing their neighbours in order to claim "the West" for themselves. Another perspective from which we may also consider the issue of Orientalism and Occidentalism is through „mental mapping", where the world is organized through ideas, myths, and fears of one community (Aretov 2012: 92). The idea of East Europe, which was formed in the age of Enlightenment, is one of the examples of mental mapping (see Wolff 1994). Bakić-Hayden calls this "an intellectual project of a demi-Orientalization" (Bakić-Hayden 1995). At this point, it's interesting to show how one of the most famous contemporary philosophers, Slovenian Slavoj Žižek, sees this tendency of orientalizing one another. He applies this process not only to the Balkans but also to the Central and West Europe, which is where the comedy of doing so – orientalizing "the Other" – starts (Žižek 2012). If we take Slovenia as a

place where the Balkans start geographically, we will soon realize by looking into historical records (Slovenia as a part of Austrian Empire, never being under the reign of Turks) and the contemporary situation (being part of the EU, mentality influenced by Central European sentiments and being the most developed country of ex-Yugoslavia) that a lot of Slovenians claim that the true Balkans, as a cultural and social category, start in their neighbour, Croatia. Croatians, having partly the same influences as Slovenians (just not from Austria but instead from Hungary, being only partly under the Turks) take the same steps as Slovenians did, claiming that "the true Balkans" start further east and south in Serbia. Serbians would continue the pattern, saying they are part of Europe and that Kosovo, as the last fortress that protects Europe, forms part of the true Balkans and so on. The inherent comedy comes to light when Žižek applies the same "rule" for other, Central and West European nations. For example, Austrians see Karavanke, a mountain chain between Austria and Slovenia, as a border, dividing Europe (Austria) from the Balkans (Slovenia). Going further north, Germans claim to be "true" Europeans, since Austrian society is too mixed with Slavs to be European in the "right sense". The French see something dark and suspicious in Germans so therefore the Balkans must start there. Continuing like this we come to the British people – at this point, it's quite hard to know whether Žižek is making a joke out of all of this or if the situation really is like that – who apparently claim that the whole Europe is actually the Balkans and that Brussels is the new-age Constantinople. Believing Žižek's words or not is not crucial at this point. What he is trying to say and indeed the important message to see in this "story of rejecting the Balkans" is the fact that the Balkans as a category are never "here", they are always "the Other" that is – in modern-age, popular negative connotations and pejorative images of the Balkans – the guilty one.

This rhetoric – of mental mapping and claiming that the Balkans are "there" instead of "here" – can be instrumentalized in order to gain an advantage and to hurt an opponent that is described intentionally as a barbarian. In reality, as Aretov points out, Orientalism and Occidentalism do not come into serious conflict in the Balkans but they share spheres of influence (Aretov 2012: 96). Cufurovic writes that "(…) Orientalism is a discourse constructed by the West towards the East in which the East is grouped together as being similar to one another while at the same time fundamentally dissimilar to the West" (2017: 43). While the West is "superior", its East is the inferior "Other" (ibid.). Maria Todorova argues that while being "geographically inextricable from Europe", the Balkans are constructed as its cultural "Other" (Todorova 1994: 455). In this way, the Balkans have become the repository for the West to project negative characteristics and cultural frustrations

on, while at the same time highlighting this way their positive and self-congratulatory image of "the West" (ibid.). Having said that, we can once more point to the analogy between the Balkans and the Freudian term "subconscious" since the former really has that function but not of its own choice.

Having to ostracize an "Other" where we ourselves can be the pure one, could also be argued under René Girard's mimetic theory. Girard observed that human beings learn by mutual imitation, meaning that we learn what to desire through the desire of others. These desires are not natural ones, like hunger or thirst, they are rather "a product of culture and socially constructed" (Thomas 2014: 311). This is similar to Jacques Lacan's "desire is always the desire of the Other" (ibid.). Through this mimetic desire, a mimetic rivalry arises. Mimetic rivalry and competition are then the main cause of violence: "By making one man's desire into a replica of another man's desire, it inevitably leads to rivalry; and rivalry in turn transforms desire into violence" (Girard 1977: 169). The only way to end violence is through the scapegoat mechanism where one member has to be sacrificed as a scapegoat. It is the scapegoat onto whom uncomfortable feelings are projected and this scapegoat is then persecuted, thus providing a conduit for the person doing the scapegoating and their uncomfortable feelings (Thomas 2014: 313-314). In this way, vulnerable persons or groups are singled out and "sacrificed". According to Girard, this is a part of mimetic rivalry. Feelings of envy become so great in a society that they eventually reach a tipping point at which order and reason cede to chaos and violence. To quell this violence, which poses an existential threat to society, a person or group is singled out as a repository for every bad emotion and through its sacrifice as a scapegoat, it offers a sacrifice for the violence to cease (ibid.). The Hobbesian "all against all" becomes "all against one" (ibid., 113).

How does this apply to the Balkans? We would suggest it can find its application in numerous ways: just by looking into the history of humankind we can spot countless examples of using the myth of religious violence to reinforce adherence to the nation-state. The violence of the scapegoat mechanism becomes unveiled at times of sacrificial crisis in society, i.e. when ethnic, religious and nationalist passions are stirred up, also evident in the war in Bosnia and Croatia not so long ago – a true example of "ethnic scapegoating" where violence contributed to building a community – and constantly present in conflicts in Middle East and tribal (or national) conflicts in Africa (cf. ibid., 321). In the case of the Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosnians, religious and ethnic or national symbols of war were used as a part of political and national mobilization – promoting an ideology of hatred, genocide and ethnic cleansing, euphemistically referred to as "rites of sacrifice" (cf. Ibid.,

321-322). People singled out as victims were targeted – sacrificed in mimetic terms – on basis of religious identity. Another problem arises here, i.e. the so-called "crisis of distinction" (ibid., 324). This term indicates that, from the outside, it is evident how alike people who kill each other actually are: in terms of culture, ethnicity, language and so on. People who lived together for centuries, "twinned tribes mutually scornful and imitative of each other" (ibid., after Appleby 1999: 78-79), turned into enemies. Contributing to that, they had the mimetic desire for the same objects: territory, language, education… as a part of bringing their own identity to the foreground (ibid., 324). "The mythological killing of the brother […] re-establishes difference, which discourages mimetic rivalry and collective violence" (ibid., 325). On the other hand, we can apply this mechanism to the Balkans by quoting what Maria Todorova has said about this place being a repository (or the subconscious, following Dolar's idea) for Europe's negative characteristics and negative feelings, the Balkans being scapegoated (Todorova 1994: 455). But nearly every country on the Balkans does it to the rest, too, as we have seen in Žižek thoughts about it: establishing their "Westernness" or "Europeaness" by pointing out how another country further to the east is even more oriental or eastern than they, thus scapegoating them to appear more western against this background. The violence arising out of mimetic rivalry can be found in the ethnic violence of the Balkan wars, which is a very fitting example for Girard's mimetic theory (Thomas 2014: 321).

Some Balkan scholars tried to go above the dichotomy Orient-Occident or East-West in order to show how the gap – created mostly by Western thought – between these concepts can be overcome. One of the ways they tried to do this was via introducing the term "Balkanism". Maria Todorova argues that this term evolved to a great extent independently from Orientalism and, in certain aspects, against or despite it (Todorova 1997). For her, "Balkanism" entails an intrinsic effort to understand the ambiguity within European identity since the continent is culturally and socially very diverse, besides the fact that every nation also has a unique history of its own and a common "foundation" in Roman, Germanic, Slavic or any other past that they belong to. Talking about "Balkanism", we have to be careful in which sense we are using the term because it has two of these. First, it stands for knowledge about the Balkans and, second, it stands for a critical study of the same object. Even though we said that "Balkanism" developed separately from Orientalism, the two are organized around the same sense of binaries, such as irrational-rational, central-periphery, historical-political and others (Bjelić & Savić 2005: 3). But what is important to say is that "Balkanism" is not a subspecies of Orientalism. Why? Mostly because Orientalism and its critical study originated in the West, while "Balkanism" originated on the Balkans and is, therefore, an

intellectual export. Besides that, they also have a different institutional organization. What also contributes in a major way to Balkan identity is the Balkans' geographical and cultural status as a liminal space. This status at the same time resists representational stability of the area (ibid., 7). One of the reasons for that is the fact that liminality in itself or as a term is much closer to centrality than to marginality, opposing the most common association of the Balkans (or of East Europe in general) being on the threshold of Europe, serving as a sort of hallway to the main salon of the European mansion, Central and West Europe (if we consider Istanbul as the entrance to it). Considering liminal status as being closer to centrality has two consequences: the first one is reclaiming representational concreteness, and the second one is that the Balkans are then known through what Foucault calls "subjugated knowledges" (ibid.). This kind of knowledge is a knowledge of certain places, bodies, histories, concealed and subjugated because such entities resist the discourse of universal rationality (ibid.). These knowledges are excluded from dominant discourse when our way of thinking and knowing itself becomes a subject to a dominant culture. This being said, a paradox looms here, a paradox in which established internal polarities are created by binary logic: Christianity-Islam, civilization-barbarism, centrality-marginality etc.(ibid.).

In conclusion, we can say that one thing is certainly true: the Balkans constitute a sort of bridge between East and West, Orient and Occident, without any negative connotations or meanings to this. Quite the contrary: the liminal position of the Balkans can be seen very positively and can be (and was throughout history) highly beneficial, since a culture that evolves in that kind of a place keeps contact with both sides (or several sides) while at the same time it develops and improves its own identity and specialness. Possible and sincere negativity and tension in the Balkans, wars and conflicts, poverty and backwardness seen and presented in history books were mostly produced somewhere else or caused by "the Other" that, ultimately, benefited immensely from these. And when we say "from these", we mean from the actual blood spilled among brothers, from the actual hatred sowed among them to this day, from the actual differences and diversity which used to be the specialness, the perk of this place, later being transformed by force into deceitful reasons and justifications at the same time for terrible atrocities, which – sadly – usually gives birth to infinite number of revenges.

The metaphor of the bridge from Ivo Andrić's novel *The Bridge on the Drina* can be applied here. What is interesting is that this metaphor includes hermeneutical circles (Bjelić & Savić 2005: 16) that transform "a bridge" into "a wall" that divides rather than connects. Of course, there are a lot of other metaphors that are or can be used but that of the bridge is the

central and most common one since it reveals the Balkan experience of being in-between. We believe that research in the vein of this text, research which connects such a large spectrum of topics and problems in different areas (linguistics, literature, culture, philosophy and so forth) can only be beneficial in acknowledging the first, primal dimension of the "bridge" metaphor, a dimension that integrates and does not exclude anyone or anything.

In the beginning of this paper, we tried to establish the starting point for our research with Aretov's work on Orientalism and Occidentalism, then explained the concept of "the Other" and why it applies to this topic. From there we moved on to exemplify the problematic dichotomy Orient-Occident and "the Other" using Neuburger's research about the medium of the fair to dwell on the difficulties with which the organisers of the Plovdiv Fair of 1892 were confronted. Then we connected these problems to the concept of liminality and liminal spaces. With Žižek, we showed the difficulties in the concept of constantly trying to orientalize another "Other" to reaffirm one's own identity. We tried to connect this process of othering to Girard's mimetic theory and his scapegoat mechanism, showing how this scapegoating has been used in numerous hostile behaviors and violent wars despite an inherent resemblance between players on the Balkans. We then discussed the concept of "Balkanism" that Todorova introduced and tried to connect it to the other aforementioned concepts. Lastly, we deemed Andrić's metaphor of the bridge to be appropriate to show a possible positive interpretation for the numerous problems that have been mentioned to remind us to look to what connects rather than divides.

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