

Review Essays *

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POLITICS, CULTURE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

A COMMENTARY ON DR. KARAKASIDOU'S "POLITICIZING CULTURE:
NEGATING ETHNIC IDENTITY IN GREEK MACEDONIA"

Despite Dr. Karakasidou's (1993) attempt to critically evaluate the alleged repression suffered by Slav-speakers in Greek Macedonia, she fails to make a persuasive case because of faulty methodology, inconsistent analysis, unconvincing theory, and weak evidence. Simply put, the analysis does not support the article's conclusions.

Methodological concerns

Nowhere in the article is there mention of research design or method for collecting data. This is not a minor point since the integrity of scholarship is based on scientific method, that is, the ability to replicate the study and verify the findings¹.

The design suffers from several threats to its validity. How representative is the sample of the entire population about which she draws inferences? We are left completely clueless as to the percentage of the Slav population

* *Editor's Note:* A response prepared by Dr. A. Karakasidou for these essays will be published in the next issue of *Balkan Studies*, due to the fact that her text arrived too late to the editorial committee.

1. I am not talking about the tightness and rigor of the natural sciences but rather about the sometimes imprecise methodology of the social sciences. Precisely because of this fuzziness, every student learns that it is imperative to spell out the research design, the method of data collection, and the problem of controlling for additional variables that may help explain the phenomenon under investigation.

that she studied relative to the total Slav population in the entire region. If she has studied only the elephant's tail so to speak, how can she be so sure of what the entire elephant looks like? What controls did she use to avoid potential biases in her sample? Did she seek out specific individuals who, on the basis of solid theoretical reasons, would be able to provide her with complete and unbiased information, or did she simply gather information by striking "amicable" conversations with whomever was willing to talk to her (1993: 3)? Was there any variation among individual respondents in information concerning ethnic identity and historical memories? More interestingly, why did she rely on different types of sources to present the Greek and Slav cases? While she used almost exclusively anecdotal evidence to build the Slav case (1993: 10-14), perhaps to personalize these people's "plight", she did not use any interviews to make the Greek case. Could she not approach local or national authorities to get first-hand accounts of the Greek side of the story? Yes, the Slavs complain of mistreatment, but should their word be accepted at face value? Did she bother to confront Greeks with these allegations or to consult archival material to verify their validity?

There are strong indications that the data may not be reliable. She mentions that research was conducted in July 1991 (1993: 1) although she informs us that she has been researching the area for several years (1993: 3). Timing, however, might have biased the responses of her subjects because her collection efforts coincided with outbursts of nationalistic fervor in the neighboring Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), which finally resulted in the proclamation of independence in September 1991. Since the Slavs that she interviewed claim to have a close affinity with the people in Skopje (1993: 12), is it not conceivable that the search for the ethnic identity of the former would be motivated by the same political objectives of the latter? This is probably the case since the author admits that some Slavs in Greece have their own political agenda (1993: 20). Such potential bias seriously damages the credibility of her argument because it demonstrates that the ethnic identity of her subjects, which she readily accepts as being constant and non-politicized, actually changes over time and is conditioned by political forces outside Greek national boundaries.

Logic of argumentation

The legalistic presentation of plaintiffs and defendants gives the article an aura of serious scholarship, but in reality the logic of her argumentation is unacceptable in academia. Although in court it is enough to poke holes in

the other side's story in order to make a case, in academia proving the defendants wrong does not make the plaintiffs right. Because the null hypothesis is that there is no relationship between the variables she examines, the author should convincingly establish first whether and why Slavs are "right" and then show whether Greeks are "wrong". She did the latter but neglected the former.

Even more so, the title and the abstract suggest that the article seeks to rationalize the adverse political response of the Greek state (dependent variable) in terms of the distinct ethnic identity of Slavs in Greece (independent variable). But in the text the author reverses the direction of the relationship and uses repression by the Greeks as the independent variable to demonstrate the distinctiveness of ethnicity and historical validity of Slav claims. In other words, she uses alleged repression as the only evidence to demonstrate alleged distinctiveness. If they are repressed, so the logic goes, they must be different. On the contrary, if the author believes her own premise that "ethnicity is a social and cultural construct", then she should have engaged in a detailed and thoughtful "examination of the dialectical process of the conception and perception of identity" and have linked "this process to material relationships and to social interaction" (1993: 19). This close and painstaking analysis is nowhere to be found.

Critique of theory

It is surprising that the author treats the adverse effects of politics on indigenous ethnic groups without raising a similar point regarding the acquisition of ethnic identity. She seems to argue that the only distinguishing criterion between the processes of acquiring national and ethnic identities is the presence of politics, which is described as the transition from the private to the public spheres (1993: 6-7); indeed, we are told that it was the presence of the Greek state and its political ambition that undermined a previously harmonious coexistence between local peoples with distinct ethnic identities.

This is a very myopic view of politics because it erroneously identifies politics with the state and because it elevates the presence of the state to that of a necessary and sufficient condition. How do individuals acquire their ethnic identity? Certainly not solely through family, since ethnicity transcends kinship. If social interaction is the key, how are the limits defined—that is, who is to be included in the same ethnic group and who is to be excluded? In addition to geographic criteria, the sense of ethnicity is often transmitted through a network of common language, rituals, religion, traditions, and

racial characteristics and is reinforced by political authority. Politics, in other words, need not manifest itself only through the presence of the national state; it encompasses a variety of forms of collective authority. Before there were nations, there were ethnai; does this mean that there was no politics? Although the terms *ethnos* and *nation* are admittedly amorphous, the difference in the process of building either centers on the ability to forge sovereign authority and the willingness of other similar groups to accept that authority². This is a central aspect of politics but certainly not the only aspect.

I agree that history is a construct. But the proposition must include two qualifications. First, it is not only Greek history that is constructed (1993: 18). If Greek historical memories of descent from Alexander the Great are considered to be far-fetched — despite the plethora of archeological evidence to support this thesis — why shouldn't the Slav claim that Greeks arrived in the area after 1913 (1993: 10) also be considered equally far-fetched³? How come she accepts as historical truth the claim that Slavo-Macedonians lived in the region as a distinct, ethnically conscious group for centuries when official censuses carried out by the Turks prior to 1913 made no mention of Slavo-Macedonians but rather identified Slavs in the region either as Serbs or as Bulgarians? In fact, Bulgarians have long contested the ethnic and national allegiance of these people. In this vein, if the presence of Greek national authorities was the necessary and sufficient condition to negate these people's ethnic identity, how can the author explain the Ottoman authorities' similar response? Why are Greek claims carefully scrutinized and criticized as lacking in insight or historical validity whereas claims made by Slav villagers are glorified as absolute truths? Is there something to Slav memory that is inherently superior to Greek memory? Scholarly objectivity necessitates careful scrutiny of what both sides claim.

The second qualification is related to the first. Ethnic identity and

2. My thinking on this point has been influenced by Smith (1986), Alter (1989), and Kellas (1991).

3. Christides (1949: 33-6), for example, informs us that the first Ottoman Parliament, which was elected in 1908, included among non-Turks five Greek MPs and one Bulgarian from the part of Macedonia that was later incorporated into the Greek state. Moreover, data from the Turkish census of 1905 found in Barker (1950: 11) reveal a strong Greek presence in the region. The ethnic composition of the non-Turkish population in the three vilayets — Thessaloniki, Monastir, and Kossovo — that cover more than present-day Greek Macedonia reveals the presence of 648,962 Greeks in the area as opposed to 557,734 Bulgarians and 167,601 Serbs. Based on these numbers, it appears not only that there was a large number of Greeks in the area but also that Slavo-Macedonians had not yet acquired an ethnic identity.

historical memories are to an extent politically constructed, but they can also be verified largely as facts or myths. Reality is not a mere subjective interpretation of events but also an “objectively” identifiable course of events; otherwise the term history loses its meaning. To avoid the pitfalls of relativism by carrying the constructionist argument too far—that is, to avoid viewing everything as a lie because it is my story against yours, so to speak—we must use scientific techniques, which are tested for their explanatory power and limitations, to determine the accuracy of historical claims. This, however, dictates a serious historical analysis or at least extensive references on the contested points, a necessary effort that is absent in the article.

Critique of substantive points

Finally, I feel compelled to address the accuracy of Dr. Karakasidou’s evidence. There are several points of contention, but I will elaborate on only two of them. First, it seems reasonable to suggest that language or genealogy alone do not constitute adequate criteria of ethnicity (1993: 8, 9, 18). If that is the case, however, why does Dr. Karakasidou so readily abandon her ideals? Why is she so eager to provide us with her own estimates of the size of that group of people in the Florina region today by distinguishing it as “either Slavic speakers or descendants of Slavic-speaking families” (1993: 22, note 6)? Surely numbers are hard to find, but committing the same mistake that she criticizes others for making is an even graver error.

Secondly, the author does not adequately explain the reasons behind the alleged repression of Slavs in the region. Surely the Greek authorities’ concern is understandable (1993: 19), but the reader is not given a clue why this is so. This is surprising, since the article focuses on precisely that point. Two factors that help explain Greek anxiety are the communist ideology that some of these people espoused and the role they played during the Greek civil war. It is highly unusual for a study that claims to analyze the politicization of Slavic culture in Greece not to make explicit and frequent references to the fact that claims for an ethnically distinct “Macedonian” people were made most forcefully largely by Bulgarian communists during the inter-war period⁴. This was the Comintern’s way of driving a wedge into the heart of the Balkan monarchies at the time. Even more so, many, although not all,

4. This section draws heavily upon Barker (1950) and Kofos (1993b). The latter work contains ample references and documentation for the more demanding reader.

of the Slav inhabitants of Greek Macedonia took up arms during the Greek civil war initially on the side of Greek communists against the nationalist government⁵. After refusing to abide by the Varkiza agreement (February 1945), some Greek and Yugoslav communists agreed to form armed bands in Greece consisting of Slav-speakers under the direction of the National Liberation Front (NOF), which was in turn controlled by the Communist Party of [Yugoslav] Macedonia. They proceeded to terrorize the indigenous population, including many Slavophone Greeks, for either collaborating with the Bulgarian occupation authorities during the Nazi reign in the Balkans or for not subscribing to “Macedonian” and communist ideologies. At the end, the national army defeated the communist insurgents, pushed pro-Yugoslav forces over the Greek border, and proceeded to take revenge on suspected enemies. As in civil wars elsewhere, personal vendettas had their share of the blame. Consequently, the anti-communist fervor that permeated successive Greek governments, particularly after the civil war, coupled with an intense Cold War, go a long way toward explaining the Greek authorities’ response to Slav ethnic claims. Such a discussion is curiously absent from the article, perhaps because it does not help paint so clear a picture of ruthless villains and innocent victims.

In conclusion, the analysis in Dr. Karakasidou’s article does not support her findings and conclusions. The article lacks analytical rigor and scientific objectivity. The point is not that there is no case to be made, but rather that Dr. Karakasidou has failed to make it*.

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5. This point is made lucidly by Kofos (1993a).

* *Acknowledgments.* The author would like to thank Antony Moussios for his constructive comments.

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