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DEFINING ETHNIC IDENTITY IN HELLENIC MACEDONIA

Remarks on: Anastasia Karakasidou, "Politicizing Culture: Negating Ethnic Identity in Greek Macedonia", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 11 (1993), 1-28*.

There is no doubt ~~that~~ nation-building is a process which has caused a lot of sorrow and pain all around the world by creating, affecting or even violently transforming ethnic identities. In this context it could hardly be argued that the case of Greek Macedonia in the early 20th century was exceptional. But presenting the case of a "negated ethnic identity", the Slavo-Macedonian one, is a socio-anthropological study of particular importance, because it is inevitably connected with the complex history of the Macedonian Question, which goes back into the 19th century. Moreover Karakasidou's paper assumes additional political meaning because the whole issue of "negation" is also examined in the context of the present controversy between the Greek State and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.). I hardly dare to touch Karakasidou's solid theoretical grounds, but I feel that her sentimental attachment to the Slavo-Macedonian activists she met in western Greek Macedonia cannot really compensate for some of her particularly weak points.

Karakasidou's main argument is that, in the process of nation-building in Greece, Slavo-Macedonian ethnic culture has been politicized and consequently banned. Although in note 3 (why not in the text?) she states emphatically that "...the bulk of the population of Greek Macedonia today is nothing less than Greek in national consciousness and political loyalty..." yet she claims that the process of "negating" is going on as far as "some local communities" are concerned (p. 5). These remarks are not to deny that culture has been politicized in Greece. This is a phenomenon quite common in Eastern

* This paper was originally submitted for publication to the *JMES* but was rejected because a similar study had arrived earlier on.

Europe, especially in young states, where ethnic nationalism prevails and sometimes historical rights are considered more important than civil rights¹. Criticism is exclusively focused on Karakasidou's "negation" theory.

In particular "negation" for Karakasidou implied (a) the construction of the necessary nationalist ideological framework and (b) past and current political action against the "ethnic minority". The first assumption, i.e. the ideology, is presented through Nikolaos Martis views and the Cold War writings (1946 and 1955) of Stilpon Kyriakidis (p. 8). Although Mr Martis has been an eminent politician and ex-minister he has never claimed to be either a professional historian or a social anthropologist, nor his theory should be cited as portraying Greek academic positions. On the other hand, Kyriakidis' views on *ethnos* were perhaps representative of his post-war generation, but his influence on one "modern" historian does not really prove anything but the latter's ignorance of post 1945 texts on such theoretical issues. Bibliography on Greek nationalism (both by Greek and non-Greek authors) is quite extensive and up-to-date and is by no means represented by late Professor Kyriakidis or by K. Vakalopoulos².

The process of "negating" in terms of political action is given by Karakasidou firstly through selected "historical" evidence, mixed with the accusations put forward by contemporary Slavo-Macedonian activists, and secondly by presenting the case of the Greek reaction. "Historical" account starts with the "threat" of hellenization and bulgarization in 19th century Macedonia, but for some reason she does not state that this process was met with no ethnic "Macedonian" resistance at all in those days. The shortcomings of the four year Metaxas dictatorship (1936-40) —her second "historical" argument— come next; it is a well known story³ which has frequently been exploited by activists who usually tend to disregard state tolerance between 1912-1936 and even forget that oppression in those days had a far wider character. Communists in particular surely consumed much more castor oil than any Slav-speaker. Moreover the Metaxas repertoire, to the extent that it is true, concerned the harassment of the pro-Bulgarian element. But

1. See for example Eleonora Skouteri-Didaskalou, "Everyday Culture in 19th-20th Century Northern Greece. Social Practices and Historical Discourses (Towards a Meta-Folklore?)", *Südosteuropa-Jahrbuch*, 22 (1992), 44-52.

2. See for example Paschalis M. Kitromilides, "Imagined Communities' and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans", *European History Quarterly*, 19/2 (1989), 23-66.

3. See Evangelos Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia* (Institute for Balkan Studies: Thessaloniki, 1964), p. 50.

Karakasidou mentions nothing about transition from Bulgarian to Macedonian identity.

“Historical” evidence is conveniently connected to 1990-91 minority demands for (a) “the right to gain equitable access to jobs” indeed a very common, almost traditional, complaint which is shared by all Greeks who do not work for the public sector; (b) “to practice their own Orthodox religion”, a charge which would be very serious if Greece (Greek— and Slav—speakers alike), Bulgaria, Serbia and F.Y.R.O.M. did not all share the same dogma; (c) “to speak their own language”, which they freely do even in front of a stranger, as Karakasidou testified herself in her meanderings around Edessa; and (d) “to educate their children” in their folklore and stories. Is it realistic to think that censorship has been imposed on grand-mother fairy tales? As far as folk dances are concerned it would be relatively easy for a reporter to travel around Greek Macedonia, especially during the summer, and witness numerous festivities and weddings when such dances are performed. Not to mention that such occasions are frequently broadcast by state or municipality TV channels.

Additional importance is paid by the author to the native language apparently to support cultural (i.e. ethnic) differentiation. She argues that (a) the language is not the same with those spoken in Serbia and Bulgaria but quite the same all around Greek, Bulgarian and Yugoslav Macedonia; (b) that a prominent politician, Mr Stelios Papatthemelis, wrongly considers the local Slav-dialect as Greek; and (c) that Greek scholars maintain the view that this language is a “communist construction”. The combination of these three opinions certainly makes Greek arguments sound absurd. However, it is a common patchwork fallacy because Karakasidou does not declare explicitly that (a) Greek views of a “communist constructed” language do not refer to the local dialect, but to the official language of Yugoslav Macedonia, which was indeed “purified” from Bulgarian elements only after World War II⁴; (b) Mr Papatthemelis is certainly not a linguist and should not be cited for his linguistic views, but if he is cited then some more attention must be given to his arguments; (c) quite often Slav-speakers in western Macedonia testify that they can hardly follow the official language spoken in Skopje or even to the north of Bitol (Monastir). Apparently activists who are in contact with Skopje for more than one reason are not included in this category, but I hope that Karakasidou must have contacted some non-activists as well.

4. See Evangelos Kofos, “The Macedonian Question: The Politics of Mutation”, *Balkan Studies*, 27 (1986), 159.

Moreover, the identification between linguistic and cultural identity is a clear mistake concerning the Macedonian region. Even linguists such as Friedman—who can hardly be considered as pro-Greek— have explained that “the identification of ethnicity and language (in the case of Macedonia) is not a simple one-to-one relationship”⁵.

Part of Karakasidou’s “negation” theory deals also with the question of the political refugees which is indeed a very sensitive issue for the locals in western Macedonia (pp. 12-13). But by saying simply that they “fled north during and after the Civil War and have been denied permission to return” is too simplified a version of an extremely complicated political question, which chiefly involves Tito’s plans for annexing Greek Macedonia, a very real threat, sufficiently documented by modern historians (not by K. Vakalopoulos)⁶. Again Karakasidou is aware that the bibliography is extensive and irredentism is still running high, but all these historical details probably do not fit her model.

The last part of her theory gives ample evidence about the activists’ views. However what is not told openly is that all claims that festivals are supervised by the police, (does she actually know of more than one incident of this kind?), unsuccessful attempts to establish a “Shelter of Macedonian Heritage”, and appeals to international fora they all have been initiated and performed by a handful of activists, probably the very same who supplied Dr Karakasidou with her evidence. Social anthropologists have indeed the right and the obligation to protect the identity of their informers. But readers of this paper could question whether sufficient representative cases have been studied in field work before presenting these views. What is the “bulk” of the population after all and what is a “minority” or “some”? In other words is she writing about an ethnic minority or about a marginal group of people who have recently named all their unsolved social and financial problems as “ethnic Macedonian” because they expected to hit the headlines under the present political and diplomatic circumstances?

When it comes to the “Greek defence” of the Macedonian cause the

5. V. A. Friedman, “The Sociolinguistics of Literary Macedonian”, *International Journal of Languages*, 52 (1985), 31.

6. See Basil Kondis, “The Macedonian Question as a Balkan Problem in the 1940s”, *Balkan Studies*, 28 (1987), 151-160; Evangelos Kofos, “The Impact of the Macedonian Question on Civil Conflict in Greece”, *Occasional Papers*, 3 (Hellenic Foundation for Defence and Foreign Policy: Athens, 1989); Basil Kondis & al. (eds), *Resurgent Irredentism: Documents on Skopje “Macedonian” Nationalist Aspirations (1934-1992)* (Institute for Balkan Studies: Thessaloniki, 1993), pp. 24-59.

picture again is not at all objective. The arguments presented in her paper are by no means representative neither of conservative, nor of liberal and leftist views. Indeed the Macedonian Question has caused a serious political debate in Greece and considerable anxiety among the Greeks, who regard history as the back-bone of their nation-state. But presenting all views as versions of the same “nationalist” scenario, thus ignoring a large scale dispute among political parties, newspapers, reporters and academics is a serious error, at best indicating problematic channels of information, at worst bias and unnecessary sentimentalism⁷. Attorney Ms Ekavi Nomikou, Mr Lazaridis and Mr K. Vakalopoulos, Karakasidou’s examples, are not really representing anyone, sometimes not even the views of the newspapers where their articles were published. Nor did the 1988 International Congress in Melbourne illustrate the views of all Greek academics on the Macedonian Question. In addition most political analysts would agree that the alleged role of Turkey and the United States in the Macedonian Question is not just part of a naive conspiratorial theory that Greeks extensively use, as Karakasidou maintains. In fact post-1991 developments, like Turkey’s willingness to intervene in Bosnia (vetoed by France) and the dispatch of American troops in F.Y.R.O.M. demonstrate that Greek concerns should not necessarily be ignored or dismissed *a priori*.

All in all, Karakasidou’s paper gives abundant and fairly convincing evidence that culture is politicized in Greece, at least if we take into account politicians’, reporters’ and attorneys’ willingness to “protect” Greek “historic rights”. But all these does not imply the validity of her biased “negation” theory which my criticism is exclusively concerned with. Because, even if we leave out her selective presentation of only those (non-official) views who conform with her theory, even if we accept the deliberate omission of a solid historical background and the supposed ignorance of bibliography, even if we do not question the representative value of her interviews, still one question remains: since she has adopted a modernist constructivist theory on the issue of Greek nation building (see “Hellenized Alexander” in p. 20 and note 11

7. For a different political view see for example the book by Leonidas Kyrkos, *To adixodo vima tou ethnikismou. Skepsis gia to Makedoniko* [The dead end of nationalism. Thoughts on the Macedonian Question] (Themelio: Athens, 1993) or even the edition *Macedonia: History and Politics* (Society of Macedonian Studies & Ekdotiki Athinon: Athens, n.d.), pp. 40-46. The latter book has been translated into various languages, as representative of the Greek views, while a revised edition was even forwarded to all Greek secondary schools.

undermining the Byzantine legacies), why does she maintain such premordialistic views when referring to Slavo-Macedonian nationalism and ethnic identity? Why, for example, is it selectivity justifiable for “ethnic Macedonians” who consider the interwar sufferings of the pro-Bulgarian element as part of their own history, and not for the Greeks when they boast about Alexander and Byzantium? How long is actually the history of “Macedonian ethnic”—not national—“demands” and what is the precise timing of its appearance and development? Moreover, what solid historical proof does she have—if any—that ethnic Macedonians actually existed before nationalists in Skopje searched in their turn for the ethnic core of their brand new nation-state? “Negation” presupposes existence after all, at least to certain extent; unless she refers to the rights of people to develop at any time a different new ethnic identity with state support, indeed a liberal demand which has never become a realistic political option in Europe⁸.

Karakasidou states in her last paragraphs that “some Florina activists, working their own agenda of cultural survival have reappropriated the ready-made nationalism of Yugoslav Macedonia as a statement of collectivity of their own cause, but *others* resist reenculturation by attempting to establish *their own* original myths of collectivity” (p. 20). Readers would appreciate if Karakasidou could substantiate the objectives of this latter “resistance group” of the “others” as related to the former in another paper. Because in this one there is not even a single argument which is not in complete alignment with Yugoslav (“ready-made”) Macedonian nationalism; except perhaps her last comments on the development of “a secessionist consciousness” among the Slav-speakers. Sometimes, even without field work, propagandists in Skopje, sound more realistic than sentimental social anthropologists...

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8. See Loring M. Danforth, “Claims to Macedonian Identity. The Macedonian Question and the Breakup of Yugoslavia”, *Anthropology Today*, 9/4 (1993), 7-8 who shares the “negation” theory but states that Macedonian national identity has been constructed as well.