

# *Symposium*

## **Gossiping about the “Nation”: A Response to the “Septième Congrès International d’Études du Sud-Est Européen”**

**Thessaloniki, August 29 - September 4, 1994**

The 7th annual congress of the “Association Internationale d’Études du Sud-Est Européen” took place in Thessaloniki (Greece) between August 29 and September 4, 1994<sup>1</sup>. Once the economic and intellectual outlet of a vast Balkan hinterland and a highly cosmopolitan port city, Thessaloniki was probably the best venue for dozens of historians and other social scientists to contemplate over the complexity of Balkan affairs<sup>2</sup>. It was inevitable that the proceedings were strongly influenced by the current Yugoslav crisis —just a stone’s throw to the north— and even more by the prospect of perpetual national clashes in Eastern Europe. Understandingly enough most major discussion topics had been deliberately planned to concentrate on the study of patterns of political co-operation, or on the various aspects of cultural and linguistic similarities shared by the Balkan peoples<sup>3</sup>.

Not surprisingly, in this particular atmosphere a few participants challenged —more often indirectly than directly— prevailing primordialistic views about the nation. It was by no means an intentional side attack planned by Benedict Anderson’s followers; a Balkan conference is not the perfect place to launch such an offensive. However, a number of papers in different sessions contested the elements of ethnic continuity and homogeneity, concepts

1. This paper is based on the abstracts and papers submitted for the Thessaloniki congress; they have been published in two volumes regardless of the fact that some of them eventually were not delivered. A part of the present study has been published in *The Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism Bulletin*, No 9 (Spring/Summer 1995), 25-26. Dr George Agelopoulos and Dr Philip Carabott were kind enough to put forward a number of valuable suggestions which were greatly appreciated.

2. See Gilles Veinstein (ed.), *Salonique, 1850-1918. La “ville des Juifs” et le réveil des Balkans* (Paris, 1992); Basil C. Gounaris, “Salonica”, *Review. Fernand Braudel Center* 16/4 (fall 1993), 499-518.

3. Three topics in particular are revealing of the organisers conscious efforts to deconstruct Balkan tensions: Thème majeur No 2 was titled “Efforts de coopération balkanique en rétrospection et en perspective”; Thème majeur No 3 focused on “Unité et diversité des cultures populaires du Sud-Est européen jusqu’à la fin du XIXe. s.”; Thème Majeur No 4 tried to answer the apparently rhetoric question “Y-a-t-il une ‘mentalité balkanique’?”.

extremely important for Balkan national myths and convenient for social mobilisation. Hopefully a recapitulation of these views, coined almost at random, will facilitate a better understanding of the Balkan political deadlock.

From the point of view of social anthropology Dr George Drettas maintained that the *millet* system in the Ottoman Empire should be analysed as a complex of cleavages with various and transforming social functions rather than as a set of mutually exclusive groups comprising homogeneous people<sup>4</sup>. The perception of the *millet* system has strongly influenced the rise and evolution of nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire<sup>5</sup>; indeed, its existence is indispensable for the foundation myths of various non-Muslim communities<sup>6</sup> which regarded the *millets* as immune calibres of pre-existing national identities numbered over a long period of time<sup>7</sup>. In this context Drettas' remarks, that cleavages between religious or ethnic groups were not impassable but permitted various cultural contacts, could be accounted, to a certain extent, as a challenge to traditional views of the *millets*.

The notion of cultural communication was taken further by Dr H. Antoniadis-Bibicou<sup>8</sup>. She pointed out two fundamental elements which have contributed in the past to the creation of a common "esprit balkanique": Orthodoxy and the Ottoman political framework. Her main argument was that the patterns of reproduction of cultural differentiation are in fact related to the perception of the "nation" among the Balkan people. To her conclusion that "differentiation does not necessarily imply conflict" one might add: unless conflict is important to make cultural distinction felt.

This last remark, about the importance of distinction, was elaborated by two papers in particular. Dr Angeliki Konstantakopoulou examined post-1945 historiographical trends in all Balkan socialist republics. She emphasised that

4. George Drettas, "Pratiques de la différence et idéologie populaire: de quelques clivages constitutifs de l'aire culturelle ottomane", *Septième Congrès International d'Études Sud-Est Européennes. Rapports* (Athens, 1994), pp. 301-323.

5. Kemal H. Karpat, "Millets and Nationality: The Roots of the Incongruity of Nation and State in the Post-Ottoman Era", Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York & London, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 141-167.

6. Benjamin Braude, "Foundation Myths of the Millet System", Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York & London, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 69-83.

7. See for example Apostolos Vakalopoulos, *Istoria tou neou Ellinismou* [History of Modern Hellenism], vol. 2 (Thessaloniki, 1976), p. 207.

8. H. Antoniadis-Bibicou, "Recherches sur les conditions historiques de la formation du différent et du commun dans la culture des pays balkaniques", *Septième Congrès International d'Études Sud-Est Européennes. Rapports* (Athens, 1994), pp. 229-247.

in the aftermath of World War II nationalist historiography in the Balkans has underlined "what separates rather than what unites" neighbouring states<sup>9</sup>. In her conclusion she referred to the existence of a "cultural racism" and "cultural discrimination" both of which are supported by the deliberate manipulation of historical tradition. Since "nationalism dominates the political and social life" of the Balkans, it was inevitable, for historiography to be "transformed into an unprecedented ideological battlefield".

Employing different examples and methods Professor Spyros Vryonis reached almost identical conclusions. He presented four Balkan case studies taken from Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey which revealed that in the Balkans (not just in the former socialist republics) the quest for lengthy historical continuity (in terms of a distinctive culture, language or race) has been a legitimising element for political use<sup>10</sup>. For Vryonis the development of ethnogenetic theories is attributed to "romantic nationalism" which has influenced all Balkan states and has affected negatively their historiography<sup>11</sup>. One is tempted to relate Vryonis' points to Anthony Smith's analysis of "Nationalism and Cultural Identity" only to show that this quest for roots is not just a matter of "infusion of western doctrines"; it is identical with the very existence of various ethno-nations not only in the Balkans but in many parts of the world<sup>12</sup>.

In this context the prospect of a positive answer to the rhetorical question posed by Irwin Deutscher's paper on "Living with Ethnic and National Differences: Are There Policies that Work?" was rather grim. Professor Deutscher, strongly influenced by recent Balkan strife, reviewed minority policies around the globe to end up with the "continuum between assimilation and pluralism" and the dilemma between "local and transnational policies" to settle ethnic conflicts<sup>13</sup>. His somehow allegoric conclusions suggested that "vengeance is not a solution for it is self-defeating"; national forgiveness is the most preferable basis to built democracy and intergroup justice<sup>14</sup>.

9. Angeliki Konstantakopoulou, "Postwar Balkan Historiography in the Present Turning Point", *Septième Congrès International d'Études Sud-Est Européen. Rapports* (Athens, 1994), pp. 801-813.

10. Speros Vryonis, "Some Ethnogenetic Theories of Greeks, Roumanians, Bulgarians, and Turks in the 19-20th Centuries", *Septième Congrès International d'Études du Sud-Est Européen. Rapports* (Athens, 1994), pp. 765-791.

11. Vryonis, "Ethnogenetic Theories", *op.cit.*, p. 765.

12. Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991), pp. 71-98.

13. In fact a transnational solution, i.e. the establishment of Balkan Community, was coined by Professor Kristo Frasheri as an answer to Balkan security problems. See Kristo Frasheri, "Peninsule Balkanique: héritage et perspectives", *Septième Congrès International d'Études du Sud-Est Européen. Communications* (Athens, 1994), p. 31.

14. Irwin Deutscher, "Living with Ethnic and National Differences: Are There Policies that

Professor Deutscher's civic advises unfortunately were incompatible not only with the theoretical framework set by other scholars but also with Dr James J. Reid's paper which analysed the phenomena of vendetta and vigilantism in the Ottoman Empire to conclude that their chief legacy is "the development of chauvinistic nationalism in various regions once belonging to the Ottoman Empire"<sup>15</sup>.

At this point one cannot fail to notice that through different viewpoints, examples and methods scholars, sometimes serving different disciplines, have noticed that there is a structural impediment to Balkan co-existence and co-operation. Though different adjectives were used, like "romantic" or "chauvinistic", its characteristics and shortcomings (i.e. cultural racism or differentiation, historical and linguistic continuity) were described well enough to portray an image of deeply rooted ethnic nationalism.

Whether "forgiveness" is a virtue which can flourish in an environment where "forgetfulness" is regarded as a curse undermining nations is a serious question (or rather a demand) for Balkan education planners that the Thessaloniki congress has not answered. But it is a historic irony if the current and least pleasant situation in the Balkan peninsula is compared to the 18th century, pre-enlightenment and pre-nationalist era in the same region. Professor Paschalis M. Kitromilides in his attempt to resolve the issue of "Balkan mentality" concluded that in those days "the Orthodox religious culture, Ottoman rule and the idea of Europe, formed the framework of communication which, connected with a clearly recognizable political context, could be interpreted as a distinctive, historically plausible 'mentality' "<sup>16</sup>. Had he gone a step further he could have easily argued that these characteristics might indicate a state of proto-nationalism as Hobsbawm has shown<sup>17</sup>.

Nevertheless, proto-nationalist feelings cannot by themselves shape either nations or states. For various reasons, state formation in the Balkans followed

Work?", *Septième Congrès International d'Études du Sud-Est Européen. Rapports* (Athens, 1994), pp. 735-757.

15. James J. Reid, "Irregular Military Bands and Colonies in the Balkans, 1789-1878", *Septième Congrès International d'Études du Sud-Est Européen. Rapports* (Athens, 1994), pp. 361-390.

16. Paschalis M. Kitromilides, "'Balkan Mentality': History, Legend, Imagination", *Septième Congrès International d'Études du Sud-Est Européen. Rapports* (Athens, 1994), pp. 441-467.

17. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 46-79. In fact Valentin Kitanov in his paper considered some of these factors as incentives for the idea of a Balkan federation quite popular among intellectuals during the 18th and the 19th centuries; see Valentin Kitanov, "Conditions préalables à l'idée fédérative sur les Balkans au XIXe. s.", *Septième Congrès International d'Études du Sud-Est Européen. Communications* (Athens, 1994), p. 37.

an opposite route: the U.S.B(alkans) never joined the U.S.A. Posing today counter factual questions like the above, about the essence of Balkan nationalisms, is neither a proper historical method nor a good excuse to make moral judgements about historical events. Therefore the aim of this paper —unlike many recent journalistic reports— is not to criticise or to ridicule national feelings in the Balkans by exposing the deficiencies of their construction and reproduction. However, occasionally counter factual questions do help to demonstrate that western mediation and peace making in this region cannot be achieved without an in-depth knowledge of local identities and their socio-political functions. On the other hand, such questions also provide an interesting stimulus for a profound reconsideration of national interests intended for the use of Balkan politicians and intellectuals alike.

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