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The Swing of The Pendulum: Balkanism Between Semantic Proscription and Vindication

The paper analyses the shift in the perspective on the terms Balkan and its derivatives Balkanization and Balkanism from a negative connotative semantics towards a positive one. It traces the origins of the terms as a process of oustering and disects the source of the present volte-face. It relates the boost of interest in Blakan identity to the postcolonial ideology bringing forward a change in the geographical and socio-cultural shaping of the world while also unmasking the lack of substance underlying this increased preoccupation with the Balkans.

Key words : *Balkan, Balkanization, transvaluation, postcolonialism, othering*

I will begin this paper by challenging you with my positing the consistency of the following list of concepts: Gothic(k) (whether spelt with a 'c' or with a 'ck'), Impressionism, Irishness, Balkanism/Balkanization and you may wonder what the connection might be between such apparently disparate terms. What could warrant such a juxtaposition that looks more like Borges's Chinese classification rather than a coherent corpus of concepts which may constitute the starting point of an argumentation? In the present paper I would like to look at precisely this highly unlikely, all but imperceptible connection and particularly at the underlying cultural mechanism that makes it possible in the first place. Thus, I will be busying myself with the cultural implications of an essentially semantic process, that of *transvaluation*, i.e. with the vindication, the redeeming of proscribed terms, the revalorization of compromised notions. What I am interested in are not the casual, historical slippages of meaning, inherent to the dynamics of etymological evolution, but those fairly numerous instances of deliberate, 180-degree semantic reversals, in the programmatic, willful mis-appropriation of a former, more often than not, *negative* meaning and its transformation into its polar-opposite. I intend to sidestep the ivory-tower quality of such an analysis by focusing on the protean semantics of the word Balkan and its derivatives.

The question that inevitably comes to mind is what is at stake here in this almost Quixotesque movement of semantic rehabilitation? What is the point of turning a term of insult, abuse and slight into a very badge of identity, into a source of pride and allegiance? Who does the vindicating and what is the envisaged end? The most culturally salient examples, as manifest in the list above, are to be found in the history of art, with such initially derogative terms as Gothic, Impressionism or Pointilism being appropriated against the grain and hollowed out of their negative, offensive original import.

As we already know, the term *Balkan* and especially its verbal derivative *Balkanize/Balkanization* came to designate the utterly undesirable reality of ethnic conflict

and political fragmentation following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th, beginning of the 20th centuries. The negative connotations of the term can be easily detected for what they are: the product of the ongoing, fundamentally Western, process of othering the East, a process going back, according to theorists like Larry Wolff, to at least the 18th century.

Now, political fragmentation had existed before the downfall and final disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, which emblematically left in its wake a host of politically inchoate ethnic communities struggling for self-assertion and for ever tracing ebbing-and-flowing state boundaries. Then, one may justifiably wonder, how come the term *Balkanization* stuck, how come no one thought it appropriate to coin other words denotative of political disunion, such as, for instance, *Germanization* or *Italicization*, all derived from territories notoriously riven by internecine conflict and forever struggling for a union of sorts (one should moreover *not* lose sight of the essential difference between the controlled fragmentation characteristic of the Italic space, on the one hand, and the explosive potential of Balkan fragmentation, on the other).

I should think that the reason for the endurance of this coinage is to be sought at a symbolic level. Whereas the German and Italian states were at the very heart of (Western) Europe and, as such, fairly well-known, easily kept tabs on, easily monitored, the Balkan peninsula on the other hand, as an entire tradition of theoretical writings has been pointing out for the past few decades, had always been a projected Other, little known in its genuine self, more often than not imagined, fantasized, ventriloquized, and its conflicts looked upon as an alien, endemic and potentially dangerous influence. Moreover, there would be little point in othering entities, like the German and Italic spaces, which are in themselves defining of the very core of Western European identity. So we need to take into consideration the subversive, undermining implications of such an attempt at a new coinage. Thus, the marginal, geographically and culturally remote, or comparatively remote, Balkans lent themselves smoothly to the role of the Other. That this semantic proscription, this relegation of the Balkans to the negatively connoted area of European vocabulary is *par excellence* a Western construct is shown by the radically altered meaning words like Balkan and Balkanism carry in Bulgarian or Greek culture, for instance. The very lack or rather the borrowed virulence of the verbal, pejorative, process-designating *Balkanization* in these cultures points to Balkan identity being apprehended in this space as a positive, tradition-sanctioned reality, it points to *Balkan* and *Balkanism* as denotative (by making a virtue of necessity) of the Self and not the Other.

However, what interests me here is not so much the polarization of meaning inevitably resulting from the assumption of different perspectives, different vantage points, as those examples of semantic volte-face taking place within *the same* cultural paradigm, whereby antonymic meanings come to coexist, to concurrently inhabit the same cultural reality. I am interested, in other words, in the positive, affirmative rise to renewed topicality of the Balkans within the selfsame Western culture that proscribed them. The readiest example I could invoke at this juncture is the tremendous success and salability of Goran Bregovic's music or of Kusturica's films on Western markets. It is such cultural displays that appear to be a confirmation that Balkan identity can be synonymous to something other than bloody political divisiveness, that there can be found a silver lining to the cloudy stereotypical view of the Balkans.

The question is, nevertheless, to what extent this is a genuine transcendence of the former negative typology. Are we witnessing a change of heart, a change of attitude in Western appraisals of the Balkans? Is this a major paradigm shift we have here, unfolding before our very eyes? Well, for all the appeal that the prospect of such momentous change may have for us, I for one choose to remain an adept of the notion of *longue durée* and to be a doubting Thomas in this respect.

My argument, derived from similar ones invoked in feminist theory (Rösler 61), is that far from being a genuine semantic, doubled by a cultural, volte-face, this pointed comeback of Balkan identity on the Western agenda falls in the same pattern as the very-fashionable-now-in-the-West study of postcolonial, formerly subordinate cultures – hence the existence of academic departments specializing in *subordinate studies*.

Let me succinctly review the clichéd dichotomy between the West and the East: so whereas the West has always been seen as the birthplace of civic nationalism, the locus where conflicts are amiably resolved, the cradle of rationality and civilization, the East and, by narrowing down the circle of reference, the Balkans on the other hand have as of always been perceived as deeply divisive, Europe's perpetual powder keg, the seat of ethnic nationalism and so on and so forth. So according to this Manichean duality, the scales are tipped in favour of a positively-connoted West towering over the negatively valorized East.

What happens nowadays warrants the conclusion that, in point of prominence, the the tables have all of a sudden been turned on the West in favour of the East/Balkans, which have become the latest object of academic, commercial interest, or of cultural probing within Western academia (to be superceded only by the new-fangled interest in Arabian culture, maybe). However, this renewed, this time, positive salience/visibility does not seem to bring about a cultural, symbolic equilibrium. This very topicality points to a casting of the old negative image of the Balkans in the garb of exoticism (cf. the plight of chinoiseries in the 18th c). Now, implicit in the notion of exoticism, as shown by the very etymology of the term, is the status of outsider (cf. Gr. *exōtikos>ex* = outside, out of). Therefore, subtending this benevolent, good-humoured resurgence of interest in the Balkans is, to my mind, yet another discourse of marginalization or rather a perpetuation of the former discourse, a new, politically correct, blast in an old, essentially prejudiced, horn. What we witness here is an almost Darwinian instance of the formerly prejudicial discourse adapting to the new international ethical requirements, in a little-apparent reinforcement of the status quo by virtue of the principle of the survival of the fittest, in this case, the fittest discourse. We detect here an effort at updating the formerly offending axiological paradigm and, at the same time, at taming, placating (in a show of magnanimity, of openness) the wronged other by reintroducing it into the discourse.

All these evolutions are not far from Foucault's notion of *passer tout…au moulin sans fin de la parole/* passing everything through the endless mill of speech (Foucault 30), a syntagm which encapsulates the repressive, policing effects of the seemingly liberating *mise en discours* of uncomfortable realities. Thus the insulation achieved through the negative discourse is equally carried on by the selfsame discourse turned positive, an insulation through language, functioning very much like a 'machinery for speechifying, analyzing and investigating'(Rabinow 313).

My contention is that today's discourses on the Balkan question not only do not serve to disrupt former stereotypical patterns of thought but, precisely by their capitalizing on the victimized status of this region, become instrumental in recapitulating and reinforcing the

very system of thought they are seemingly out to counteract. And in order to further bolster the credibility of my argument, I will just point out that it tunes in with similar critiques developed in globalization theory and directed against the liberal jeremiads bemoaning the victimization of local, traditional cultures at the hands of the neocolonizing, globalizing tendencies of the West (see Frederick Buell's comprehensive argument in *National Culture and the New Global System*).

Affording a certain group or area increased discursive visibility does not necessarily guarantee axiological vindication. Thus the preoccupation with the Balkans in recent years should rather be seen as symptomatic of changes concerning the West and not the East. I can not help comparing this situation with the current attempt by Romanian authorities to implement EU injunctions as regards minority rights, and in particular Roma rights. By the newly introduced measures (promoting educational positive discrimination), Roma representatives are seemingly helped to integrate, but actually their exceptional, outsider status is thus perpetuated in the form of little-effective positive visibility.

Thus, academic writings on the Balkans either concentrate on the imagology of this geographical area, implicitly feeding on the Derridean postulate *il n'y a pas dehors texte*, or they do recognize, as is the case of Professor Todorova's insightful book, that there is something underneath the criss-crossing webs of discourses, that there is a level of *realia* that needs, and is worthwhile, investigating (Todorova 161). My apprehensions relate however to epigonic writings that manneristically rehash the Balkan problematization, in other words, writings which revolve within a closed discursive circle without adding any genuine informative value to the body of scholarship concerning the Balkans or any pragmatic value for that matter. My question is to what extent, once the 'rub' has been pinpointed and delineated by pioneering works, to what extent, therefore, further academic exchanges, conducted along the same lines, can actually influence and ameliorate conflicts which are by their very nature outside the ambit of highbrow intellectual theorizations, outside this sort of *mise en discours*. Thus, by way of conclusion, I venture my tentative critique of this new, second-wave body of literature to the effect that, until we have found the means to relate what appears to me to be two disjunct spheres, that of social life (convulsive and theoretically inchoate) and that of academic life (argumentative and at times rigorous to the point of departure from reality for the sake of a schema), we will do nothing but indulge in the bookish gratifications deriving from intertextual sparring.

Needless to say that in laying all this argument before you I am hardly being original myself. I myself, in other words, am in my turn perpetuating an intertextual circle, that of self-reflexive academic writing. The only difference is that, in acknowledging this, I am trying to render my argument critique-proof by forestalling any objections along this line that might arise.

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