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Tonči Valentić: History and Memory. Media Discourse and the Construction of National Identities

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Abstract

This paper presents an outline of my dissertation thesis and examines the highly complex relationship between history, memory, national identity and power with the main goal of analysing various discourses of cultural and social memory as well as 'forgetting strategies' in South-eastern Europe. The main objective of this research is to assess the media's role in shaping Balkanism as a culturally constructed discourse with the underlying hypothesis that the media produce symbolic identities that are recognizable in the form of reinvented and remapped historical narratives. In order to apply a theoretical framework to this particular case study, i.e. the symbolic construction of identity in Croatian daily and weekly newspapers and political magazines in the period from 1995 to 2008, the paper analyses the cognitive mapping and (dis)location of Croatian identity as both 'European' and 'Balkan'. To this end, I chronicle the social transformations that are reflected and easily observable in various media reports, news, essays and commentaries on diverse social events. Because discourse on Balkanism has been widely present in Croatia in the last twenty years and since it has hugely influenced the course of social and political events, my main research objective is to investigate how the various media strategies reflect identity and whether they enforce collective ethnic and cultural identification; these can be most accurately described as approval or recognition of pre-established post-colonial patterns leading up to 'metaphorical colonization'. In other words, the main point is to discuss the ways in which the media's presentation of the Balkans is based on stereotypes and whether there are causal links which could explain the occurrence of such rhetoric in periods of social reformulation and its role in memory politics. My research methods include content analysis and discourse analysis of selected newspapers from 1995 up to now, concentrating on three periods of time and various notions of the Balkans and Europe, especially on the 'rhetoric of Balkanization'.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the traditional notion of historiography has changed significantly: the influence of various interdisciplinary perspectives such as philosophy and sociology as well as the cultural changes in the field of humanities have fostered processes of analysing historical events as narratives and have unveiled elements of narration in official historical documents. These changes have given rise to different perspectives on a specific historical event and have spurred the growth of approaches that deal with the problem of memory and inscription as reliable scholarly sources when analysing historical data. Rather than asking what actually 'happened' in the past in terms of establishing or producing an official interpretation of an event, scholars have become more interested in the (re)construction of personal experience, such as a story or literary prose that relies on memory, as an alternative way to comprehend history. Self-understandings and subjective descriptions of the world became very important in particular among the historians and sociologists studying Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism due to the dramatic changes that followed. In short, people found themselves in a completely new world, but living with a 'new past', a past which has continually been reconstructed and remapped, both by dominant post-socialist ideologies and by the memories of people who lived under socialism. In that sense, historians and sociologists not only found themselves in an awkward position as members of disciplines bewildered by the fictional character of their scholarly subject, but they were also faced with new chronologies and the compression of elapsed historical time that took place in Central and Eastern Europe. Pragmatically speaking, historical arguments have always been used in the region during politi-

cal wars and historiography has had to deal with memories and narratives as much as with 'solid' data such as archives or official documents. Beyond the old narratives of national history, scholars have started to seek new methods of reading historical data and to pay attention to the sudden proliferation of both literary and historical texts as part of the 'politics of memory' of socialist times.

South-eastern Europe (or, more accurately, the Western Balkans) has always been a historiographical battlefield: located between imperial and local powers and shaped by a complex configuration of perpetual changes of borders, it has had to continually rearticulate collective and individual identities. So far, many prominent scholars have analysed the changes that occurred in the recent decade in terms of sociological, anthropological, psychological or even ethical inquiry. Nevertheless, there is a lack of deeper analysis regarding cultural memory and especially the notion of revising 'official' memory, which tends to pose a major interpretational challenge. My Ph.D. research tries to fill that gap. In the period of transitional and globalization processes, which has provoked further rethinking of collective memory/ies with respect to identity models, research on the region's socialist heritage calls for deeper analysis in the field of national culture as well as rethinking existing scholarly texts. In short, I intend to reconsider the highly complex relationship between history, memory, identity and power with the main goal of analysing various discourses of cultural and social memory as well as 'forgetting strategies' in South-eastern Europe. As I mentioned above, memory plays a very important role in the construction of national, regional and local identities and it has often been misused (or abused) by the power structures that took over and narratively 'occupied' the past as a powerful scientific tool for political wars. My tasks include analysing those strategies of 'cultural defilement', identifying gaps in recent research and addressing the problem of the media's fictionalization of history and historization of fiction within the respective region over the previous fifteen years.

In my Ph.D. thesis, I do not intend to focus primarily on the structural principles of the ideological constitution of new museums or existing historical monuments as places of objectification of historical experience. In addition, the problem of biographical material that tends to be overwhelmingly important in understanding major trends of the past when reading texts as biased narratives is also a minor rather than major field of interest in my research. Instead, I will focus on mental images and the different discourse mechanisms that produce certain imagery and examine the ways in which they have been (and still are) mentally constructed and distributed in the media. In that sense, I will specifically examine traditional representations of the Balkan region, thereby endeavouring to unveil the mental maps, processes of identity creation and various acts of identification that combined to introduce a discomfited perspective and turn this geographic metonym into a non-geographical referent. Since the discourse on *Balkanism* is double-edged, meaning that it has always been predicated on two extreme notions (i.e. the bloody Balkans versus Oriental Romanticism), both European and indigenous narratives on the respective subject have always been ethically biased. The rhetoric of Balkanization as a sociological concept calls for interdisciplinary research: studying the relationship between memory, identity and power in the Balkan region entails historical, sociological, cultural, post-colonial and philosophical perspectives. Therefore, I intend to combine various approaches in order to answer some basic questions: Which strategies have been enacted and used to cast the Balkans as a notorious 'European Other'? How does the representation of the region in the media reflect processes of Balkanization and does it produce a skewed perspective? Can the reconstruction of personal experience prevail over dominant historiographical data with respect to authenticity? Is it possible to overcome the gap between the new

world and 'new past' that still haunts contemporary scholars? In other words, this paper, in the form of a Ph.D. outline, focuses on the problem of the *fictionalization of history* and *historization of fiction* and the interplay between two major actors: both the Western and Eastern notions that have given rise to a variety of media discourses on the above-mentioned subject.

2. Framing the concept

To fully address the issue, it is of crucial importance to assess the media's role in shaping Balkanism as a culturally constructed discourse. Therefore, I will closely examine the role of daily and weekly newspapers and political magazines using a case study on Croatia covering the period from 1995 to 2008. The major field of research is therefore the construction of media discourse on the Balkans in the aforementioned period with the underlying hypothesis that *media produce symbolic identities that are recognizable in the form of reinvented and remapped historical narratives*. Those stereotypes not only reflect dominant political views, but also underscore the distance from Balkanism discourse within societies in the Balkan region: the purveyors of official political ideology and historiography in Croatia in the period from 1995 to 2000 hesitated to symbolically place Croatia in the Balkan region, instead fostering its Mediterranean and Central European identity. Following the social and political changes arising from the 2000 elections, there were numerous efforts to cognitively map and (dis)locate Croatian identity as both 'European' and 'Balkan': those social transformations are reflected and easily observable in various media reports, news, essays and commentaries, and are clearly visible in headlines, titles, presentation of various social events, etc. The major focus in this analysis is on printed media precisely because I want to stress the importance of newspapers as powerful tools in the creation of symbolic identity, whereby politically-induced discourse is deployed to remap collective memory (e.g. the occurrence of so-called 'Yugonostalgia' qualified as a 'return to Balkanization' and scepticism towards integration processes regarding accession to the EU). Since it is impossible to fully analyse the entire period of time (thirteen years), my Ph.D. thesis focuses on media discourse during three major regional events: a) 1995, the year the war ended in Croatia; b) 1999/2000, when the authoritarian political party lost elections; and c) 2007, when the process of integration into the European Union was forcefully initiated. I argue that those periods are the clearest manifestations of the media's transformation of Balkan discourse into a tool for the collective shaping of cultural and symbolic identity as a sort of interplay between scholarly historiography and individual memory (Balkanism has often been portrayed as a dishonourable legacy of socialism, while the signifier 'Europe' has stood for civilization and cultural progress, which were understood as the main features of Croatian society throughout its entire national history).

3. The discourse on Balkanism and its ideological context

Hermann Keyserling once stated: 'If the Balkans did not exist, it would be necessary to invent them.'¹ Popular notions about the region have mostly been shaped by classical colonial/anthropological methods of collecting data: on the basis of various ethnographic travel reports, accounts of adventure journeys, diplomatic statements, Romantic and gothic novels, both inappropriately false and overtly romanticized images of the Balkan region as a 'middle space' between reality and fantasy have been fabricated. The notion of Balkanism has thus emerged as a completely different semantic field from Orientalism. In

¹ Quoted in Todorova, Maria: *Imagining the Balkans*, New York/NY: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 116.

that sense, the 'ontology of the Balkans' (as developed in Todorova²) bears predominant responsibility for the construction of the ethnic, national, social and political sense of belonging, and therefore the identity of the peoples in South-eastern Europe has always been relational, i.e. dependent on mental images produced in the West. Consequently, a fictional and historically 'invented' Balkan territory was mythologized, thus becoming synonymous with wars, violence, political upheavals and social disorder. The cultural construction of an imagined 'Other' has not produced Balkanism merely as a prosaic type of ethnocentrism, but moreover as the structural element of the expansion of European capitalism in the beginning of the twentieth century. In that sense, patterns of Balkanization are inevitably classified as negative, and the Balkans, as a 'European Other', have served as a reservoir of negative stereotypes contrasting with the ostensibly more 'civilized' European identity. Reintroducing that stereotype in the early 1990s was possible mainly due to the scholarly discourse that presented vague media reports and fictional stories as fact, thus turning false representations into firm, seemingly undisputable and unambiguous historiographical data. Once again, the media's role in producing national stereotypes went hand in hand with 'official' scholarly inquiry and its claims of objective knowledge: akin to the novels from the end of the nineteenth century, the Balkans were now presented in terms of primordial violence, inefficient and authoritarian political leadership, and an inability to assimilate into the civilized world either socially or culturally. Keeping that in mind, it is of crucial importance to unveil the theoretical and conceptual apparatuses that produce Balkan imagery in terms of 'opposite attractions': namely, to simultaneously impress and disappoint Western observers (Romanticism versus barbarism). Obviously, those negative stereotypes are the inevitable results of long-term *semantic sedimentation*; however, they do not operate merely on the level of linguistics, but as performative discursive tools. In order to understand the ideological mechanisms that produce such imagery, one has to become acquainted with their pragmatic function within a wider context (among numerous contributions to the topic, the works of Savić and Bijelić, Kourvetaris, Detrez and Plas, as well as those of Čolović, Bakić-Hayden and Goldsworthy deserve mention³). The rhetoric of Balkanization refers precisely to those connotations, and discourse is understood in its classical philosophical notion as a linguistic structure used as one of the representational forms: it is not only a medium that depicts reality, but one of its prominent features is to distort it, to make its borders vague and obscure. Knowledge transferred in discourse is institutionalized in practices best described as colonial interpretations.

4. The media and symbolic construction of national identity

As already stated, many prominent sociologists, anthropologists and historians have so far reaffirmed role of the media in the articulation of collective identities, but there is a significant lack of scholarly inquiry regarding certain countries in the region that has been recently (and politically correctly) dubbed the 'Western Balkans'. Memory plays an important role in shaping social identities, but is often abused by those in power to gain legitimacy. One of the tasks of my Ph.D. project is to point out the ways in which newspaper texts in Croatia in the described periods equated socialism with Balkanism: from an

² Refers to the same book.

³ Cited as follows: Savić, Obrad / Bijelić, Dušan (eds): *Balkan as Metaphor*, Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 2005; Kourvetaris, George (ed.): *The new Balkans. Disintegration and reconstruction*, Boulder/CO: East European Monographs, 2002; Detrez, Raymond / Plas, Pieter: *Developing cultural identity in the Balkans. Convergence vs. divergence*, Brussels et al.: Peter Lang, 2005; Čolović, Ivan: *Politika simbola. Ogledi o političkoj antropologiji*, Belgrade: XX vek, 2000; Goldsworthy, Vesna: *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination*, New Haven/CT, London: Yale University Press, 1998; Bakić-Hayden, Milica: *Varijacije na temu 'Balkan'*, Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2006.

epistemological point of view, one may conclude that there is a cognitive value in the discourse of transition from Balkan to European, and that the notion of Balkan in the public discourse is closely related to the concepts of post-socialism and Yugonostalgia in general. Consequently, there is a subtle interplay between the media's rhetoric and symbolic identity, which will be emphasized in this work. The pattern is usually the same: the post-socialist transition brought out 'nostalgia' as a semantically repulsive term, understood as backwardness and regression forged into a lament for times past (one of the most valuable approaches is advocated by Boym⁴). Different approaches are necessary to appropriately assess the issue of Balkanism as a pulsating historical narrative, and especially to address the problem of the media's reconstruction of personal past experience (socialist culture versus post-socialist, bewildering capitalism), which differs from historical data in its authenticity. History is born at the moment when social memory starts to collapse and disintegrate, when it ceases to be socially functional. According to that view, there exists only one historiography, but there are numerous collective memories. The analytical question still waiting to be answered is this one: Is academic revisionism and rethinking of the past epistemologically advanced and superior to the popular, 'everyday' notion of past? In other words, does historiography, as a complex web of ideologically biased discourses, have greater value than the 'everyday, common memory' of members of a certain community? I believe this problem is clearly visible in Croatia after the collapse of communism and the epistemological break resulting from the repression of memory and the creation of a completely new cultural and national identity. The line that divides history and memory into two unbridgeable phenomena, 'alive' or 'true' memory and 'artificial' or 'non-objective' historiography (where memory plays the role of a vibrant fabric of a given society and history is its problematic re-construction) brings us to the 'terror of historized memory'. On the basis of claiming rights to properly interpret the past, the discourse of Balkanization not only ideologically occupies the field of social memory, but also assumes the false role of archiving collective memory, thus making it appear more coherent, reasonable and 'scientific'. In the context of my research, it is important to analyse strategies of 'forbidden memory' from the socialist period, i.e. the period before 1991 in Croatia. The ideological function of media discourse up until 2000 was to cut all mental links with the Balkans and to place Croatia and Croatians culturally, socially and geopolitically on the map of Central Europe and the Mediterranean. This tendency was especially criticized among those who witnessed on their own identity as multifaceted, those who neither wanted to equate socialism with Balkanism nor to obey the enforced rules of the newly established patterns of cultural identification. Various sociological enquiries that have so far been done in the field have tried to analyse claims for the creation of an identity that does not subsume itself under the common umbrella of identity politics.

5. Ph.D. hypothesis

On the premise of the previously developed arguments, theoretical background and interdisciplinary studies mentioned in the first part of this paper, the main hypothesis on the notion of construction of national identities with respect to the ambivalent link between memory and history within the context of media discourse can be most accurately summed up in the following lines:

The discourse on Balkanism has been widely present in Croatia in the last twenty years and has so far hugely influenced the trajectory of social and political events. The discourse itself underwent major changes in three different periods: firstly, in the period up until 1995, when collective memory on the

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Boym, Svetlana: *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York/NY: Basic Books, 2001.

socialist era was repressed and equated with 'nostalgia for Balkanism'; at the same time, media coverage of social events reflected a political attitude that fostered an image of Croatia as a Western and Mediterranean country, constantly emphasizing its rootedness in the Western European cultural and religious context. 'Balkan' came to be a metaphor for the 'dark ages' of socialism while Europe symbolized civilization. Since 2000, media rhetoric has ceased to present Balkan as an unequivocally negative term, and after 2007 (during debates over whether Croatia should join the European Union) it started to gain some positive connotations, though primarily in the field of popular culture. However, I argue that the ideological matrix of 'Balkanism' is present even now and exceedingly influential when it comes to the construction of symbolic identity. Moreover, that problem has not yet been properly addressed in scholarship done on the issue, especially in disciplines such as sociology and historiography. The main purpose of this thesis is to point out that the social and political matrix is still influenced today by media discourse on Balkanism and Europeanism, a discourse that utilizes the same old patterns of identity creation and similar discursive mechanisms. In that sense, power elites eagerly and consciously use and abuse stereotypes invented in the West in the late nineteenth century, thus reproducing and enforcing collective ethnic and cultural identification that can be most accurately described as approval or recognition of pre-established post-colonial patterns leading up to 'metaphorical colonization'.

Inevitably, using only media discourse in the analysis cannot yield a complete and all-encompassing conclusion on the effects of the media on the public sphere and on the creation of various collective identities. Such an approach would require long-term research of all spheres of society with numerous methodological patterns. For that reason, intensive research focused on the interdependence of politics and media as well as their influence on the social fabric exceeds the scope of a single Ph.D. project, and hence my thesis will concentrate on one aspect of this rhetoric: *the analysis of the production and distribution of stereotypes of Balkanization in the given periods as evidenced in selected newspapers and magazines.*

6. Main methods of research and its major aim

My research consists of equally weighted theoretical and empirical components. In the theoretical part I will extensively analyse mutual links and interconnections between media rhetoric and national identities, discuss previous research in the field and critically evaluate its contribution. The empirical part is based upon the collection and analysis of data on the ways in which Balkanism has been presented as an integral part of the ethnic and cultural identity of Croatians. The data will be collected from content analysis and discourse analysis of various newspapers from 1995 up to now, concentrating on the notions of 'Balkan' and 'European' in the context of terms such as memory, socialism, civility, etc. Selection will be based on the 'rhetoric of Balkanization' in state-owned magazines and journals (e.g. Vjesnik, Večernji list, Hrvatsko slovo, etc.), independent ones (Feral Tribune, Zarez, etc.) and commercial newspapers (24 sata, Nacional, Globus) in the three periods described above. Printed media have been selected for various reasons: firstly, although television is by far the most powerful media and the major conveyor of political propaganda, research based on televised reports and news is more difficult to execute due to the complexity of analysing visual material and its semantics. Secondly, given the fact that printed media are characterized by a plurality of approaches (there were almost no private TV channels at that time, i.e. channels that were not owned by the state), it is possible to take a comparative approach and put emphasis on the differences between them. Thirdly, textual analysis is more suitable

and accurate in this case: in semantic and linguistic interpretations of media coverage, the patterns of Balkanization rhetoric are more observable and discernible.

Some of the research questions are: 1) How is the problem of 'Yugonostalgia' and the socialist legacy in the media associated with the discourse on Balkanism and why? 2) What kind of discourse are newspapers using in order to form symbolic identity, i.e. how are political and social upheavals reflected in media texts? 3) What are the most dominant forms of this rhetoric and what is the crucial difference between left-oriented and right-oriented magazines and journals? 4) Why do 'semantic turns' occur in media rhetoric in crucial periods of social distortions (e.g. a pluralist notion of identities as both Balkan and European around 2000, or the disappearance of the term 'South-eastern Europe', which has been subsequently replaced by the politically favoured term 'Western Balkans')? 5) Is media research intrinsically related to the deeper analysis of socio-cultural changes in Croatian society in the given periods? 6) Is there a discrepancy between sociological and ethnographic/socio-anthropological scholarship on belonging to Balkan or European civilization and the existing media coverage? 7) Are the so-called independent or non-commercial newspapers also imbued by the rhetoric of Balkanization and do they follow the same colonial patterns? 8) What are the key words and concepts used to describe the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav experience in relation to the value-burdened distinctions of equating the Balkans with socialism and underdevelopment, and Europe with freedom and development? These are some of the potential questions that I will try to properly address and answer in the thesis, relying both on a theoretical background and the analysis of empirical data as described above.

The emphasis has to be on the qualitative analysis of empirical data, i.e. on reading texts from a narrative and semiotic perspective. The main criteria in evaluating this qualitative research will consequently be multiple and executed in three phases: choosing and collecting appropriate data, providing a description for the purpose of structuring the material, and ending with a final evaluation. Equal emphasis will be placed on formal content analysis and purely textual analysis due to their importance: in order to study media discourse, it is necessary to focus on language usage and metaphors, which are its relevant components. For that reason, the main aim of my research is to show the extent to which the media's presentation of the Balkans is based on stereotypes and to question the hypothesis of whether there are causal links that could explain the occurrence of this kind of rhetoric in periods of social reformulation of collective identities and memory politics (e.g. during the years 1995, 2000 and 2008). In addition, as a parallel approach I will also examine the differences between the countries in the region that have already become members of the EU (such as Slovenia) and those in which similar patterns of media discourse can be found (such as in Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina). Consequently, the question of national identity will be analysed from a symbolic and political – and not merely cultural – perspective. Since up to now there has been no systematic and academic analysis of the rhetoric of Balkanization in the media in the Western Balkans region, I hope this Ph.D. thesis can help to bridge the gap from a sociological standpoint. Hence, one of its major tasks is to open a dialogue on that issue, not only within the academic community, but also (and no less importantly) in the wider social context. This will entail questioning the basic structures of media influence on national and symbolic identification in general, which might be a good starting point for forthcoming (not necessarily academic) inquiries.