

NATIONAL IDENTITIES AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION. THE CASE OF THE BALKANS

Vassilis Nitsiakos

“For years Europe had only one canonically recognized patron saint-Saint Benedict. In 1979 Pope John Paul II proclaimed the creators of the Slavonic alphabet, the Bulgarians Cyril and Methodius, to be also patron saints of Europe. This came as the greatest recognition, although symbolic, of the Bulgarian people’s contribution to the build up of European civilization...”

“Today Bulgaria takes up the south-east corner of Europe –on the borderline between the Old Continent and Asia. Her southern frontier borders on Turkey and, in fact, forms the frontier of Christian Europe –beyond it stretches the immense sea of Islam... Very few people know, however, that it was the Bulgarians who first brought the Slav peoples into the mainstream of European medieval Christian civilization (the basis of which the present-day Europe has been built). The credit due to them for the service they rendered in doing this can be gauged, inasmuch as it is now that all through the Middle Ages, right up to the present day, Slav peoples have occupied two-thirds of the territory of Europe and have formed nearly half of its population...” (B. Dimitrov, *Bulgarians. Civilizers of the Slavs*, Borina, Sofia, 2001:9).

It is commonly admitted that in order to achieve a successful process of political and economic unification of Europe we need to invent, to the degree it doesn’t exist, a European culture and a European history. Making history is anyway a mechanism of identity construction since it establishes a relation, usually linear, between what supposedly happened in the past and the present state of affairs (Friedman 1992:837). Also, as M. Sahlins has asserted “culture is precisely the organization of the current situation in the terms of a past” (Sahlins 1985:155).

Talking, though, about the use of cultural tradition and history as mechanisms of ideological legitimization and implementation of a supra-national unity, we are in front of a familiar process identified to a great extent with nationalism and the making of nation states in Europe. A typical European product, the nation state, is now undermined by new historical processes, which demand supranational structures and

consequently transnational cultural communication and social cohesion, which cannot be achieved without the development of appropriate ideologies. The question that arises is: is the new supra-national formation to use the paradigm of nationalism in order to achieve cultural homogeneity and social cohesion? That is to say, is cultural homogeneity and a common historical past necessary to forge political unity? If yes, then how are these to be created or invented and what about the different national, ethnic, regional and local differences?

Certainly, all historical phenomena are unique and the nation state is the product of a specific historical period of Europe, that of industrialization, modernization and the establishment of civil society (Hobsbaum 1990, Gellner 1983). Given, though, its European character as well as its effective function and considering how deeply in popular ideology national patriotism is rooted, it is quite reasonable to wonder whether the European identity is not going to be constructed by the same ideological mechanisms.

The equation “nation=state”, a fundamental principle of nationalism, meant on the one hand the politicization of ethnicity and on the other the ethnicization of polity (Grillo 1980). Irrespective of the answer we adopt to the problem which comes first, the nation or the state (Llobera 1987, Woolf 1995), in other words, did the nation create the state or vice-versa, it is true that from the beginning the nation-state was based on the principle “one people-one territory-one culture”, which meant that ethnological and cultural heterogeneity should be suppressed (Hobsbaum 1990, Gellner 1983). Even in the cases where ethnic differences could not be ignored and on the contrary should be recognized, a national identity above them was constructed to express the unity on the national level and any ethnic differences were treated rather as regional variations. The Greek example is quite characteristic for this (Herzfeld 1982).

If we accept the theoretical principle that in one way or another collective identities of any kind are socially and thus historically constructed, that there is a relation between social identification and the making of history and also that culture has anyway to do with the way societies remember, the way they perceive and organize their past on a collective basis, a matter that poses of course questions of political power and cultural hegemony, then, concerning European identity, we are faced with a supranational identity and history on the making and we are thus able to examine the manipulation of the past as well as the negotiation of cultural identity in the present.

The past is neither one nor simple. There are many versions of the past related to who is the subject that deals with it and in what way.

“Objective” history is just as much a construct as any other history. All constructions of the past are socially motivated and have, thus, to be understood in positional terms (Friedman 1992:854-5). Identity also is neither monolithic nor static. It is subject to continuous negotiation and presents a fluid and multiple character, which means that it is also subject to political manipulation. In contrast with the above principle, nationalism objectified and idealized the past of the nation, while essentialized culture presenting it as an eternal attribute of the national character and often identifying it with the national spirit, Romanticism’s “volksgeist” (Kedurie 1960, 1970, Hobsbaum 1990). Is all this irrelevant to the new situation, where a supranational identity and culture is needed to support the effort to build a supranational economic and political construction?

We know quite well that memory is not only selective but that it can also be manipulated through ideological mechanisms used by powerful political institutions. From this point of view, remembering is good but some times forgetting is better (Renan 1882). We also know that, as far as politicization of culture is concerned, what matters is not so much its content as the uses it is put to. Similarity is the ideal but difference matters. Selective use of culture and invention of tradition has been a common practice as far as nationalism is concerned (Gellner 1983, Eriksen 1993, Hobsbaum and Ranger 1983:1-14). Should and is it possible similar practices to be avoided in the new project of European unification? How can differences in history and culture be treated in an attempt to create a common worldview, a European way of life?

In theory, the European political tradition itself, that is the ideals of Enlightenment, as they were materialized in the French Revolution, provides a context of equality and respect of human rights including cultural difference. The declarations of the E.U. are quite clear and refer to a unity through difference, to respect and protection of ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic and so on minorities, which are also treated as cultural wealth within European culture. The various projects aiming at the protection of cultural diversity constitute substantial proof for this. All this is true, but in practice, and from a more analytical point of view things are not so simple.

Before going on to the case of the Balkans, let us make a few comments about national culture and identity, keeping in mind the prospect of European extension towards this area. The notion of “national culture”, a construction of the modern era of European history, poses itself significant questions related to its structural and ideological qualities as well as its relationship with other cultures, given the fact that above all national identities are contextual and oppositional in character

(P.Sahlins1998). Furthermore, any synchronic approach by no means can ignore history, as a substantial methodological tool for any interpretative attempt. Some fundamental questions, which cannot be avoided in this line of the argument, are: **a.** What is a national culture and how is it constituted **b.** Which is the relationship between the so-called “great tradition” and “little traditions” of a nation **c.** Which is the relationship among peripheral or ethnic cultures and identities with the dominant group **d.** In what degree and which way cultural homogeneity has been achieved and what does it mean for any existing ethnic or peripheral cultures?

Concerning the Balkans, these questions become more complicated and difficult to deal with, because of the fractal character of the Balkan society (Green 2005) on the one hand and the inextricable mosaic of ethnic groups and identities on the other, which in one way or another cut across the national borders and make national identities more heterogeneous internally, despite the states’ efforts to create homogeneity by all means. This is anyway a fact related to the project of nationalism itself, as it has been described and analyzed by many theorists of the nation. Homogeneity in national space and time has actually been the main attribute of national ideology and the so called “imagined community”, which is associated with the mechanisms of the education system, the dissemination of printing and the mass media, transportation and communication systems etc (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983).

Nevertheless, although this homogeneous “imagined community” is the ideal for every nation state, the degree to which it corresponds to a community of culture varies from one case to another, either on the basis of different national policies related to local or ethnic particularities according to historical contexts or due to different characters of the nation states concerning their formation out of ethnic groups, which had already formed distinct cultural identities and collective consciousness before the formation of modern states.

In the Balkans multiethnic empires such as the Byzantine and the Ottoman were superseded by the new national states, which were initially formed in principle along mono-ethnic lines. This made any ethnic or cultural diversity a difficult problem to deal with and created a general negative approach to cultural difference, since any difference was treated as a threat to national cohesion and a potential incentive for territorial claims on the part of other neighboring nation states. Also, the difficulty to draw borderlines in such a way as to make ethnic boundaries to coincide with national borders, led many times to arbitrary decisions and, as a result, islands of otherness or even national minorities were created,

which became a source of continuous rivalries and friction among the nation states involved.

Thus, we can say that contrary to what happened in the rest of Europe, where nationalism was quite successful in one way or another and irrespective of the question which came first, the nation or the state (Llobera 1987, Just 1989, Woolf 1995), in the Balkans nationalism has a different history. It was not only imported, but also created the “Balkan phenomenon” itself. “There is a widespread notion that the Balkans began losing their identity once they began to Europeanize. That this phrasing implies their difference from Europe is obvious. Far more interesting is the fact that the process of ‘Europeanization’, ‘Westernization’, or ‘modernization’ of the Balkans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries included the spread of rationalism and secularization, the intensification of commercial activities and industrialization, the formation of a bourgeoisie and other new social groups in the economic and social sphere, and above all, the triumph of the bureaucratic nation-state. From this point of view the Balkans were becoming European by shedding the last residue of an imperial legacy, widely considered an anomaly at the time, and by assuming and emulating the homogeneous European nation-state as the normative form of social organization. It may well be that what we are witnessing today, wrongly attributed to some Balkan essence, is the ultimate Europeanization of the Balkans. If the Balkans are, as I think they are, tantamount to their Ottoman legacy, this is an advanced stage of the end of the Balkans.”(Todorova 1997: 13).

The modern image of the Balkans has been created by Europe itself through the process of their incorporation in the European world. This process, though, did not lead to an even inclusion in the European reality but to the construction of an internal “other”. Let us quote M. Todorova again: “Unlike orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, balkanism is a discourse about imputed ambiguity” (ibid.: 17). This ambiguity of the Balkans is treated more or less as an anomaly, in the sense M. Douglas defined it, i.e. as matter out of place, which contradicts well established classifications and provokes pollution and consequently danger; danger both for itself and others (Douglas 1966).

Furthermore, the liminal position of the Balkans has to do not only with the East-West dichotomy, but also with the one between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Actually this latter dichotomy is considered to constitute a fundamental cultural difference. Huntington in his notorious book *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of the world order* draws the eastern boundaries of the western world in a way that leaves the Balkan orthodox people out of it...He treats orthodox Christianity

not only as a liminal and ambiguous category but also as a neighboring other of the West (Huntington 1996).

In such a situation Europe has to revise its stance vis a vis the Balkans and the Balkan countries have to revise their own history, so that it conforms to the European schema. The neighboring others of the Balkans have to be treated as or converted into European people and these people themselves have to look at their culture and identity in a different way. The new situation has to be legitimized anyway by a new reading of the past. In this context each country has to find its own way according to its particular history. The extract we use as a motto in this paper is quite characteristic. Greece, the first Balkan country to join the E.U. has done it quite successfully from the beginning of its existence as a nation state using its classical past, which is considered to be the cradle of the European civilization. The rest Balkan countries have to assert their Europeanness, if they want to join the European family. It is worth mentioning the example of Albania where a public debate is going on as to the question “quo vadis Albania” and the answer that is gaining ground all the time and becomes dominant has to do with the necessity to follow Europe and thus stress Albania’s Christian and European past. Thus, the Albanian hero George Scandenberg, a Christian fighter against the Ottomans, is a very proper symbol to assert Albania’s European identity, since he can be presented as personifying Europe’s resistance against the Ottomans, and in a way as symbolizing the fights of the western world against the eastern threats (Kaplani 2002).

We could go on mentioning various examples within the Balkans, but I think the point is already clear. So, let us proceed our thoughts on the question of integration and the fate of national identities. As we have shown so far, national ideology has stressed unity and homogeneity of the national society, conceiving space as well as time in national terms. Now, a supra-national formation is calling for a respect of difference stressing the importance of cultural pluralism for the very existence of Europe. It is in fact quite often and in different ways declared by official representatives of the European Union that the best way to lose our distinctive European cultural identity is not to enhance the various national, regional and local cultural particularities, which constitute the multicultural character of Europe.

The question that rises concerns the way that these contradictory approaches to difference can be compromised. National rhetoric emphasizes similarity and homogeneity, while the European position stresses respect of difference within unity or otherwise unity through difference. Thus, there are two substantial questions to be answered; first, what is going to be the contribution of each separate nation to the

creation of a common European culture and the writing of a common European history and second, how local, regional and ethnic differences within the nation states are to be treated?

The official position is that all national particularities should be treated on an equal basis, but in practice when we come to the question of a synthesis of differences things are more complicated. For example, in Greece there is a strong feeling that the European culture and history is constructed on a Romeo-catholic basis and that the orthodox element is marginalized. This makes many people skeptical and suspicious as far as the European unification is concerned and gives also rise to serious anti-European intellectual movements. It is quite telling that the Orthodox church tends to play a leading role in this but there are also critical voices coming from all the spectrum of the political parties stressing the difference between the orthodox and the romeo-catholic worldview. A few years ago a book about European history, which ignored the contribution of Byzantium triggered off serious reactions and protests in Greece. The above issue is also relevant to the rest Balkan countries with an orthodox tradition.

Thus, in such a case, the question how to form a new supranational entity is not simple. Furthermore, questions of cultural contact in general cannot be treated solely on the basis of politics as such but should be examined within a wider context of economic relations formed by globalization. Global mechanisms of cultural hegemony, where multinational monopolies of cultural production play an important role in imposing stereotypes all over the world, tend to substitute the state apparatuses, a development that lends new content to cultural hegemony.

As far as local, regional and ethnic differences within the nation states are concerned, things are equally complex as well as interesting. Since on an official level the European Union by its institutions and spokespersons declares that all regional, local or ethnic differences should be respected and protected, the question is whether this declaration poses a threat to national interests, given the fact that national ideologies have been based on similarity rather than difference, first, and what are the results of the implementation of these policies going to be as far as the future of regional, local and ethnic identities is concerned.

First of all, needless to say that the skepticism expressed on different levels and in different ways as far as the nation states are concerned has very often to do with fears about losing national identities, sacrificing national cultural inheritances in the altar of European unification. On the other hand, the call for respect and preservation of local, regional and ethnic variation, triggers off reactions of a nationalist character due to phobias related to real or putative threats for separatist

movements in cases where history has not been quite “friendly” to nationalist projects. In Greece, for example, there are difficulties in dealing with linguistic and cultural differences due to the existence of syndromes of national fears connected with a quite turbulent past.

Theoretically, one could talk, as far as Europe is concerned, about “erosion” of centralized nationalisms and the strengthening of both transnational and local/regional identities. Nevertheless, the question of implementation in practice of such a theoretical principle remains open, as does the question of the kind of attitude the local/regional groups. Is the awakening of local/regional allegiances and identities to lead to a confinement of the “centered” nationalisms of the nation states or to the contrary? All these related to the Balkans become even more complicated issues due to the more complicated past and present of the area and, of course, cannot be dealt with in a short paper like this.

Bibliography

1. Anderson Benedict, 1983, *Immagined communities*, London-New York: Verso.
2. Dimitrov Bojidar, 2001, *Bulgarians. Civilizers of the Slavs*. Sofia: Borina.
3. Douglas Mary, 1966, *Purity and danger*, London: Routledge.
- Eriksen Thomas Hylland, 1993, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, London: Pluto.
4. Friedman Jonathan 1992, “The Past in the Future: History and the Politics of Identity”, *American Anthropologist*, 94(4):837-859.
5. Gellner Ernest, 1983, *Nations and Nationalism*, London: Basil Blackwell.
6. Green Sarah, 2005, *Notes from the Balkans*, Princeton: U.P.
7. Grillo Ralph, 1980, “Introduction”, in Grillo Ralph, (ed.). *‘Nation’ and ‘State’ in Europe. Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Academic Press.
8. Huntington Samuel, 1996, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of the world order*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
9. Herzfeld Michael, 1982, *Ours once more. Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece*, Texas: U.P.

10. Hobsbaum Eric, 1983, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", in Hobsbaum Eric- Ranger Terence, (ed.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: U.P.
11. Hobsbaum Eric, 1990, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, University Press, Cambridge.
12. Just Roger, 1989, "Triumph of the Ethnos", in Tonkin Elizabeth et al. (ed.), *History and Ethnicity*, London: Routledge.
13. Kaplani Gazi. 2002, "Religion and Albanian national identity. Myths and reality" (in Greek), *Syghrona Themata*,81: 50-55.
14. Kedurie Elie, 1960, *Nationalism*, London, 1960.
- 15.Llobera Josep, 1987, "Nationalism: Some methodological issues", *Journal of Anthropological Society of Oxford* XVIII(1):13-25.
16. Renan Ernest, 1882, *Qu' est que c'est une nation?*, Paris, (Greek edition: Athens: Roes, 1998).
17. Sahlins Marshal, 1985, *Islands of History*, Chicago: U.P.
18. Sahlins Peter, 1998,"State Formation and National Identity in the Catalan borderlands during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries", in Wilson Thomas and Donnan Hasting (eds), *Border Identities: Nation and State at International frontiers*, Cambridge:U.P.
19. Todorova Maria, 1997, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford: U.P.
20. Trevor - Roper Hugh, 1983, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland", in Hobsbaum Eric - Ranger Terence, (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge:U.P.
21. Woolf Stuart, 1995, *Nationalism in Europe* (in Greek), Athens: Themelio..