
BALKANISATION OF THE MIND OR THE NEW POLITICAL MYSTICISM

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Abstract

Fuelled by the economic crisis and political populism, the recent European *Hannibal ante portas* complex caused by migration is rooted not only in the long lasting and general cultural fears of the stranger but also in more recent European symbolic geography of splits and borders. The present paper follows the post-1990 imagery of the Balkans, it's reshaping by a kind of cultural racism and the way this *new barbarian* is turned to the subject of a spreading *political mysticism*.

Keywords: cultural racism, Balkans, migration, European fears

1. Introduction

It was in the early 1990s - in Brussels, the heart of the European Union - that I first heard the expression 'nations à vocation européenne'.

Vocation, calling, Beruf... The German word is the most expressive, meaning 'calling' and 'profession' at the same time: some nations are thus European by calling (rooted, I guess, not in God's will, such as Weber's Protestants, but in their own history); in such nations, being European is a kind of profession. But what may Beruf mean for such societies? And what about the other nations that do not share this Beruf? Last but not least: who is deciding who has and who has not such a Beruf ?

It was not really a surprise when later on I realised that this distinction was instrumental in pushing 'the other Europe' [1], and mainly the Balkans, in a kind of European backyard. It also backed up the split of former Yugoslavia into an industrial and rational (Catholic) part, including Slovenia and Croatia, and a primitive, lazy and rather irrational Orthodox region, dominated by the Balkan-like Serbs.

For many years I almost forgot this early European family conflict, but in the last years it seems that this kind of discourse strikes back. This time, it cuts rather across societies, legitimating economic & moral oppositions between poor-because-lazy and rich-because-laborious social categories. Main European leaders seem to agree on this approach to their own population, but especially to

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immigrants taking by storm their countries. Most of them are coming from the Balkans; or even worse: they are Balkan Gipsies! ‘Balkan shadows’ seem to spread again over the continent...

It became thus instructive to look back once more at this long lasting rhetoric in order to better understand its more recent stakes.

2. Balkans and the story about the Cricket and the Ant

Everyone knows La Fontaine’s fable about the Cricket and the Ant. Ever since he wrote it, the cricket and the ant have become a typical example symbolizing the opposition between the rational, industrious, prudent and therefore rich world of the ant and the lazy, sensual, unplanned and, consequently, poor world of the cricket. The more general *archetype* beyond this quite bookish typology is that of order/disorder that manifests itself in various forms everywhere in the world.

At present, we can find this imagery opposition at work in the social representations of what we may call *the new barbarian*. This is not about the *savage* figure, excluded from humanity, nor is it about the more modern *primitive*, that un-evolved part of humankind that can/must be helped/forced to become civilised. It is about humans all right, but about humans that belong to an inferior kind of *race*: it is about our neighbours who are irremediably different from us. With them, there are but two possibilities: to keep them at distance or to *tame* them by force. Unfortunately, this is how much too often the Balkans are perceived (and how they perceive themselves).

The way the Balkans have been and still are imagined is mainly as a disorderly space (a *barrel of gunpowder* as it is currently called), a barbarian zone of irreducible *tribalism*. “The spirit of the Balkans is one of a permanent conflict. Inhabited by primitive races, the Balkans are always in a primal stage of ancestral fight against everybody and everything. To certain gifted and very educated nations or individuals this picture might look like the perfect embodiment of knightly spirit. In fact, the dominant force of the Balkans is the telluric spirit” – wrote the influential Hermann Graf von Keyserling in 1928 [2]. Almost 70 years later, *The Economist* published an article about “these retarded South-East Europeans” where it is stated that, compared to the other ex-communist countries, “Romania and Bulgaria remained mostly rural, more brutal, and to tell the truth, more Balkan” [3]. Another article in an equally prestigious American newspaper opposed the Slovenians: “these hardworking Catholic Slavs whose culture has been shaped for centuries by the Austrian regime”, to the inhabitants of Southern Yugoslavia, “a strange, bizarre, and terrifying country where the dominant religion is either Muslim or Eastern Orthodoxy”. The image produced by scientists is not very different. “Comparative scholarship has not been kind to this part of the world – László Kürti records. In an early paper, *Greater Roumania*, the historian David Mitrany suggested that ‘South-eastern Europe is not unjustly considered a hot-bed of disorder’. Others have described East Central Europe similarly: “(...) the

Hungarian historian Ivan Berend has called it ‘the crisis zone’; the anthropologist John W. Cole refers to it as ‘an ethnic shatter zone’; and the political scientist Michael Walzer uses the term ‘new tribalism’ to describe the region” [4].

But there is no reason to insist on – and even less to complain about – such images we are already used to. A step further would be to look behind those images at the ‘grammar’ that lies beneath.

3. Beyond *Orientalism*

One easy answer would be – and actually frequently is – to consider Balkanism as just one particular expression of Orientalism, i.e. the construction of an image of the Orient that is “absolutely different from the West” [5]. *Balkanism*, just as *Orientalism*, is then a form of essentialized Other, considered as a “closed system in which objects are what they are *because* they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical matter can either dislodge or alter” [5, p. 70]. Up to this point, Orientalism and Balkanism are part of the more general game of ‘segmentary oppositions’ [6], having *Occidentalism* as necessary complement [7]. In this respect, “the issue is not (or should not be) whether people reduce things to essences (...). Instead, it is whether those reductions become so entrenched that it becomes difficult to stand back from them and consider whether they help or hinder scholars in the pursuit of the questions that confront them.” [7] And the answer should be – and actually frequently is – that Balkanism, as well as Orientalism, is hindering rather than helping.

But, as convincingly argued by Maria Todorova, Balkanism is not just Orientalism, it’s not essentializing an absolute Other but rather an incomplete (European) Self [2]. It is rather this kind of ‘the other Europe’, less civilized because it was less – if at all – subject of a *longue durée* ‘civilizing process’ [8]. Balkanism is thus about the dark side of Europe, constantly repressed but also constantly feared.

A step further is made by Marianne Mesnil looking at the 19th century western Orientalist fantasies. She suggests that what the Occident has lost during its centuries long history of civilising process was nothing less than... its body. The Orient thus became a space of frustrated projections of this imprisoned body, a world of guilty but fascinating sensuality and rude bodily freedom thus challenging the supremacy of the rational order of western societies [9]. In a way, the image of the Balkans as an ‘incomplete self’ is that of an unbound body, of an incompletely spiritualized Self: for the heavenly western rationalist Order this becomes the very image of a feared ‘telluric’ Disorder.

4. The savage, the primitive and the new barbarian

Essentializing the difference is neither new nor prohibited in itself. The question is rather one of use and abuse, which, in return, depends on the meaning of difference in particular ideological settings. A *longue durée* approach of the changes in considering the difference seems thus useful.

1537 can be considered, from a chronological point of view, a crucial turn over in the history of difference. In this year a papal encyclical recognized that “Indians are indeed human, not just beings able to understand the Catholic religion” [10]. By that, something very special happened: a difference consistently perceived and considered to be fundamental was nevertheless accepted as *human*. Different beyond any doubt, the Indians are still humans.

Important wars have been fought for the acceptance and enforcement of this revolutionary way of seeing things. From a social point of view, it meant switching from considering the Other a *savage* (expelled from the human world as being non-human) to thinking of him as a *primitive* (a kind of child of the human family, a primary hypostasis of humanity in its necessary evolution). The opposition *human/non-human* that used to legitimate a system of exclusions is replaced by a repertory of *intra-human* differences, which substantiates a system of inclusion of the humanity. The Other is still kept at a distance as different, but this difference ceases to be irreducible as it is finally absorbed through evolution. From *immanent*, difference becomes *transitive*: there is a kind of *Beruf* in humankind to overcome differences through evolution.

This *primitivist ideology* [11] that marked and even founded the entire modern thinking belongs to the *civilised*, to Western society. By that, Europe was able to think of its own identity in contrast with the Others who nevertheless can be confined to compact but intelligible differences. The primitive as conceptual instrument became so central to European thought that even now “it is hard for us to accept that the primitive societies can not be seen as a display of the original social status of any society. There are two reasons for that: on the one hand, when we stop thinking of them as only the mere image of the origin we will no longer be able to understand the difference or differences between those societies and ours; on the other hand, it is this image offered by the primitive societies that makes us believe that we are able to conceive our own history” [11]. Therefore, ‘the death of the primitive’ is also ‘the end of History’ [12].

Instead of entropic progress, history proved to produce also *emergent* differences behind worldwide unification. Melting pot integration gave birth (also) to ‘new ethnicity’, market economy produced (also) trans-local social networks of ‘informal economy’, (some of) the underdeveloped countries became even more under-developed – and thus more different – and so on. How can one master, then, all these flourishing and rather unexpected differences?

Confronted with this new situation and without the help of ‘primitivist ideology’, the West seems to swing between a front-stage *love-them-all* solution, ascribed to a kind of civic police, and a back-stage *leave-them-alone* choice of

state policy. For the emerging multiculturalist ideology, differences are no more transitive in time and thus soluble in evolution but *fusional* in space, producing a kind of hybrid standard of living: *enjoy your difference as yourself!* For the more pragmatic state policy, this is but a fashionable illusion, difference turning to indifference – if not even to legal exclusion.

Conflicting as they are, these two significant trends seem to converge on one point: the Other resisting both to fusional difference and indifference policy. This perceived unwillingness to play the game is then banished as non-democratic, legitimising thus in return the own game as democracy. It is the case of what one could call the *new barbarian*, the one whose difference can neither be shared nor kept at a distance. He is a threat to *Our* order, which is called no more *civilisation* but *democracy*. The *new barbarian* is thus the embodiment of western fears, a soft version of *Hannibal ante portas!* A Hannibal that can live next door...

5. Political mysticism

In order to understand how this politics of perception works, let us take an apparently remote example: Marek Kohn's acclaimed book *The Race Gallery. The Return of Racial Science*. In this thorough analysis of *neo-racism* we can find lots of "case studies" as the following one: "New York Times magazine interviewed people at a state orphanage in Ploiesti. On being told that a foreigner is looking for adopting abandoned babies, Dr. Luiza Popescu remarked that most such children came from the Gypsy 'baby machine'. 'How could Americans be willing to adopt Gypsies?' she asked. 'Genetics is the only thing that matters from the beginning. Ha! Such a child will most certainly end up by being a thief!'" "Popescu's declaration – comments Kohn – is a stark illustration of the power of an idea to endure the passage of time. Joachim Gottfried Herder, the founding father of the Romantic notion of race, believed that each race has its own genius (*Volksgeist*), which takes various forms according to a spirit of the epoch (*Zeitgeist*). Dr. Popescu adheres to the first part of this principle with her implicit assertion that the Gypsies have a fundamentally immutable character. (...) In the late twentieth century, Herder and Lombroso's Romantic tradition is expressed through the concepts of genetics. The spirit is the same; it is its form that changes with history". [13]

Based on the analysis of many such cases, Kohn concludes that "East-central Europe is still a Romantic landscape" [13, p. 193], where "the democratic traditions have very shallow roots and the populist ones are part of the cultural patrimony" [13, p.188]. Therefore, "however often luminaries of the Western scientific elite issue statements on TV or through UNESCO to ridicule the idea of the race may rear its ugly head in science again (...) this will all count for very little in clinics and laboratories where Dr. Popescu and her colleagues continue to hold sway" [13, p. 186].

Kohn's 'explanation' of this enduring idea of racism is instructive for our purpose. His first step is to move from "Dr. Popescu and her colleagues" to an "East-central Europe landscape", producing thus a classical sophism: Dr. Popescu and her colleagues are racist; Dr. Popescu and her colleagues leave in East-central Europe; hence, East-central Europe is racist! The second step is to find a reason to this 'state of affairs'. And the explanation is quickly found in history: East-central Europe is racist because it is a 'Romantic landscape', Romanticism being a 'cultural heritage', which takes here the place of the 'genetic heritage'. And last but not least, this 'Romantic landscape (where) populism is part of cultural patrimony' and 'the democratic traditions have very shallow roots' is opposed to the 'luminaries of the Western scientific elite', producing thus an explicit order-disorder dichotomy: the Cricket and the Ant strike back...

There is much more in this kind of rhetoric than mere 'Orientalism': it is already a form of racism, a *historical racism*. Thus, what can be justifiable in 'classical' racism through *Biology* (that is *Genetics*) is now explained through another 'scientific' argument: *History*. Sharing a culture (and no more a race) makes members of this culture addicted to their history and impervious to any outer influence, such as that of the 'western luminaries'. *Culture matters!* – Harrison and Huntington claim. But this is to say that due/because their 'culture', societies are divided once and for good into 'development-prone' and 'development-resistant' [14]. In these cases, essentialization takes the form of a non-democratic *Beruf*, rooted in the history of some people, which makes them undesirable partners in the democratic game. Historical racism turns, thus, to be a ready-made weapon for the relief of democratic fears. A much more flexible one than classical biological racism, fixed as it was in the geography of races.

The Enlightenment's ideal of bridging the gap between differences through progress is abandoned. From this point of view, differences are just there, and there are good differences and bad differences. In a new kind of cosmogony, the good ones are the work of the God of democracy, the bad ones being ascribed to the work of the Devil of anti-democracy, cultures having thus their good or bad 'spirit'. Between the two camps there is a kind of holy war – or at least a 'clash' – with individual or collective cases of 'conversion'.

Historical racism is thus the political mysticism expressing this new faith&fear, born from the ashes of modern Reason.

6. Balkans in my mind

During the Kosovo war I happened to be in France. One day, entering a bar, it was quickly realised that I was a foreigner and was finally asked what do we think, in Romania, about this war. I came out with the pro-Milosevic/pro-NATO split, explaining what the good option should be. A drunkard at the bar got angry and barked at me: How can you be so stupid? Don't you see that this is not what all this is about?! It's not a damn' Western, with good guys and bad guys!

He was right. Life was elsewhere, as Kundera would put it. But I did not dare to speak up my mind. Probably I was looking for salvation myself... If Balkan is a metaphor of something, it should stand rather for the 'balkanisation of the mind', the defeat of Reason in the face of differences. It is not just about They or We, but about all of us in as far as, in understanding and coping with differences, we give up critical reason for this 'political mysticism' that seems to back up all sorts of present day discriminating populism.

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