

“MACEDONIA - THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE” (Ed. Jane K. Cowan), Pluto Press, London/Sterling, Virginia, 2000

The collection of texts titled “Macedonia - the Politics of Identity and Difference” is a result of a conference dedicated to Macedonia, organized by the NGO “Forum Against Ethnic Violence”, held in November 1994 at University College in London, Great Britain. For a Macedonian reader intrigued from not only a scientific, but also from a more general, human aspect (“what do others say about us?”), this conference/collection is also interesting when one bares in mind that the list of participants/authors from Great Britain, but also from other parts of the world (Ireland, Denmark, Greece), does not include a Macedonian. So, really, what do others say about us?

Although, according to their biographies, the participants/authors belong to the fields of social anthropology, ethnology and history, some of the texts (for example the text *On the Other Side of the River: The Defeated Slavophones and Greek History* by Iakovos D. Michailidis and *In the Realm of the Double-Headed eagle: Parapolitics in Macedonia*, 1994-9 by K. S. Brown) deal with analysis of sociological and politicological questions, using a vocabulary customary for these disciplines, but in some cases not usual for an ethnologist, at the same time some of them (dangerously) balancing on the edge between the scientific and the political. Although most of the authors are familiar with Balkans, and in its frames with Macedonian history (especially the contemporary events after the creation of the independent Macedonian state, 1991), the general impression is that Macedonia has been chosen as a topic of the conference/collection much more (as it is also said in the introduction) as a “discursive space of global importance”, as a “political project”, “symbol”, “tale of differences”, “academic topic”, than as a historically and geographically fixed entity. Such a relatively abstract definition of the examined subject gives the authors enough space for its analysis through the prism of internationally relevant, but also own theories, especially theories of ethnicity, in some cases using “vice versa” methodology: instead of drawing conclusions based upon historical data and field work, choosing and presenting the data in a way that only confirms the beforehand set thesis. And the thesis are the following: that ethnic identity (in general, but in this case the Macedonian one), although usually experienced as something “real”, in fact is not something fixed or given, but something that is liable to construction. As a support of this thesis Tomas Nagel is quoted, saing that identity is a socialy constructed, changeble definition of oneself or others, whose existance and meaning is continously regenereted, revised and revitalised. The main role in this continous process of (re/de) construction of ethnic identity, according to the authors, is played by: the relations between different ethnic groups inside and outside the ethnic boundaries, the policy of the state when it comes to this “differences” (if the state is leading a homogenic or pluralistic, multicultural policy), the relations of a certain ethnic group with the state (the relations of the local population with their own country, the relation of the diaspora with its country of origin, and the relation of the Diaspora with its “second” homeland), as well as the individual ethnic feelings of belonging. The questions that are raised by the collection are the following: How people develop a sense of national identity? Upon which criteria they choose a certain national identity, in a situation where they can choose between a few such identities?

How does this chosen identity then transfer from one generation to the other? Why people during their lifetime sometimes change their national identity and, finally, how is it possible that inhabitants of one village, even embers of one family, can have different national identities?

Without taking into account the articles that from an ethnological point of view have irrelevant or ambiguous content, I will focus upon three articles that I think deserve our attention. Those are: *Os Elin Makedonas: Autobiography, Memory and National Identity in Western Greek Macedonia* by Piero Vereni, *How Can a Woman Give Birth to One Greek and One Macedonia? - The Construction of national Identity among Immigrants to Australia from Northern Greece* by Loring M. Danforth and *Political Practices and Multiculturalism: The case of Salonica* by Georgios Agelopoulos.

The majority of the authors who deal with questions of ethnicity, think that the construction of national identity is a collective and long, large-scale historical process. The reference literature until recently did not pay enough attention to the construction of national identity as to a short term biographical process, that takes place during one lifetime of a certain individual, and that is the reason why, says Eric Hobsbawm, we in fact do not know much about people's feelings and thoughts towards their own nation and national state. This is why the author of the first above-mentioned article insists upon the (auto) biographical method, which, according to him, is one of the "keys" for resolving the dilemma that we call "formation of ethnic identity". Thus, as the most important material in his investigation, he uses the autobiographical statements and the diary notes taken in the period 1992-1995 of a person called Leonidas Hristopoulos, a farmer born in 1927 near Lerin where he lives today. Leonida's predecessors following the male line, have declared themselves Greeks, while those following the female line, as Bulgarians (i.e. Macedonians), but Leonidas decides to take the "middle road" - he declares himself to be an Elin Makedonas or Greek Macedonian. Although his official surname is Hristopoulos, he often, especially in the presence of pro-Macedonian oriented individuals, calls him by the surname of his great-grand mother who has brought into her family zadruga of an agnatic type a "domazet" - a husband (someone by the surname Hristopoulos - the current surname of Leonidas). Although the biographical method, used in just one or a few investigated cases, can not be relevant when one attempts to explain the formation of the ethnic identity of larger groups (to be statistically relevant in this case it should contain the autobiographies of all these people, that in most cases proves to be impossible), the author Vereni through his article/tale of a "small" history in the frames of the Great one, however succeeds to present us the delicate, quite personal background upon which the shapes of the personal, and in its frames the ethical identity of each and every individual is formed, and that should be kept in mind when questions of this sphere are to be analyzed.

The second above-mentioned article deals with national feelings of the inhabitants of the Lerin region (in the text under the name of Florina) in Northern Greece (that is Egejska Macedonia) that have immigrated to Melbourne, Australia. The construction of national identity of the immigrants from the Balkan national states that have migrated to the countries with plural democracies is a complex process due to the following: the immigrants in their new country carry with them the identities that were constructed in their homeland, and in a situation when the expression of this identity in the homeland was not possible (as for example with the inhabitants of Florina who living in the Republic of Greece felt like Macedonians, but they could not express this feeling publicly), suddenly find themselves in a situation

to feel as they want to, without the fear of state repression. However, faced with the multicultural policy of Australia (in the frames of which they are Europeans or people with non-English origin) on one side and the nationalistic policies of the Balkans that reach as far as Australia, their possibility of choice is not unlimited. As citizens of Australia of non-English origin they can choose from the ethnic categories that already exist in the official discourse of the Australian multiculturalism (to choose if they would like to be members of the Italian, Polish, Macedonian or other community), and as former inhabitants or offspring of former inhabitants of the Balkans they have to be either Serbs, or Croats, or Greek, or Macedonians. Thus, the observation of Pelizi, according to which once in exile nations become ethnicities is correct. The diaspora, although geographically distant, is a mirror of the processes that happen in the homeland. Thus, the dissolution of Yugoslavia resulted in the dissolution of the Yugoslav community in Australia and the creation of separate Croatian, Serbian and Macedonian communities. That is further proof that even in the frames of the multicultural societies, such as Australia, the hegemony of national categories can not be avoided. On the contrary. Thus the process of building ethnic identities that, when it comes to the Macedonians from Lerin started by the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, is still going on - inhabitants of one village, members of one family even today continue to discuss to which nation they belong. In the frames of these discussions two stands prevail - according to the first national identity is something that is transmitted through blood, that is genetically, it is an objective and permanent (unchangeable) natural fact. This biologist conception of national identity, no matter how metaphorical it sounds, is often understood literally.

The third text is an excellent critical analysis of the development of the multiculturalism discourse in the town of Thessaloniki (Solun), during the last decade of the 20th century, and the challenge that it presents for Greek society and state that is still defined as national, resembling the national states formed in the 19th century, whose institutions, besides the huge changes in the ethnic structure of Greece during the 20th century (immigration of Albanian refugees and population coming from ex-USSR), are still implementing politics of national homogeneity. One of the impulses for writing this article is the election of Thessaloniki as a cultural capital in 1997, that is, playing on the card of the multicultural character of the city during the preparation of the program of this manifestation, that has attempted to make a compromise between two exclusive stances: the Hellenic and the "cosmopolitan", that is, the multicultural one. Analyzing the history of cultural pluralism of Thessaloniki in the past, especially in the context of the Ottoman empire, when the basis of the current ethnic structure of the city has been established, as well as the later demographic changes that happened after the Balkan wars and the First World War, to the latest waves of refugees' immigration of the 80's and 90's, the author presents the past but also the current problems of part of Thessaloniki's population that is nationally and/or culturally different, problems that the Greek state can overrun not by formal utilization of terms as "cultural pluralism" and "multiculturalism" for political and advertisement reasons, but by redefinition of the nature of the Greek state, going beyond its ethnic model. Finally, the author is posing a question primarily to the Greek intellectuals, journalists and politicians: how is it possible to recognize the existence of the "others", without at the same time defining one's own identity?

The collection of articles titled "Macedonia", inspite of having a certain number of errors, from the ones of a linguistic nature (inaccurate transcription of some Macedonian words), to a few more serious mistakes in the sense of "political correctness" and accuracy, for example the one in the Introduction (pg.9) saying:

“Macedonia represents a case where state agencies, whether through fear of irredentism from neighbors or through concern with national purity, have sought to assimilate, expel or otherwise control those citizens who represent divergence from the national ideal” (?!), is nevertheless a useful publication, especially from a point of view of application of (relatively) new methodologies when it comes to questions related to national identity. No matter if we finally agree with the thesis that this identity is *exclusively* socially constructed and if it is changeable or not, the ethnic processes (among which the processes of constructing and deconstructing ethnic identities) are dynamical (mobile, changeable) category. Thus, when one examines those processes he/she should bear in mind primarily those factors which impulse their modification, factors that are usually beyond the power of control of the ones who possess the identities.

Review by
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