Re-imagining Balkan diversity beyond and 'straight through' the ethno-national

Jelena Tosić

From a long-term perspective, the most recent developments in the Balkans neither give the impression of the destruction of diversity and are usually read as a revival of violent ethno-nationalism. Apart from the dramatic case of Former Yugoslavia, one can indeed easily trace the evolution of ethno-nationalist genealogies in Albania, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania in the last/post-imperial contexts up to the present day.

Nevertheless, the hegemonic representation of Balkan states—by media, politicians and 'experts'—and outside of the Balkans—can be characterized as quite simplistic. Aside from, for example, ethnic conflict, crime and corruption or 'masses' of potential immigrants, the ethno-nationalist implosion of the Balkans eroded by 'historic hatreds', xenophobia and genocide is also the subject of endless accounts. The 'positive' accounts have been equally Balkanistic and telological: prosperity due to free markets and privatization, citizens embracing the 'learning democracy' or brave activists fighting ethno-nationalism as the main social 'evil'.

Without denying the salience of ethno-nationalist mobilization, and by no means disrespecting those who tragically bear their lives and homes—does it make sense to talk about majority/minority, discriminate against and secularize minorities, marginalize, export and kill people because of the 'other' they are thought to embody? Are citizens of the Balkans led foremost by ethno-national sentiments as opposed to a 'democratic' consciousness of diversity 'naturally' embodied in a European future?

By drawing on anthropological and transdisciplinary 'decolonizing' of this ethnocentric and neoliberal gaze on the Balkans on the one hand, and fieldwork conducted in various parts of the region on the other, in this chapter I aim at a simultaneously exploratory and synthesizing engagement with the issue of diversity in the Balkans. Thence my line of thought follows a dialectical movement between two theoretical–empirical perspectives, both of which I regard as indispensable and interwoven.

The first takes seriously the tenacity of ethno-nationalism as one of the dominant dimensions of conceptualizing diversity in the Balkans. Inseparable from the first, the second perspective engages with looking 'beyond' ethno-nationalism (Vendrye 1994) by in fact seeing 'strait through' it—'diversifying' simplified readings of the Balkans by exploring its interdependence with and occlusion of other dimensions of social differentiation (such as the urbanity–rurality, economy, kinship, mobility, citizenship or gender) and their intersections throughout history.
Power, race, and sexuality: contesting the hegemonic masculinity of the public sphere.
Keith Lowe

and its aftermath

European Fascism