

***Waiting for Macedonia: Identity in a Changing World.* By Ilká Thiessen. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2007. 260pp.**

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Ilká Thiessen's *Waiting for Macedonia*, based on research spanning from 1988 to 1996, considers how a group of young, female engineers in the Macedonian capital, Skopje, negotiated the vast social and political changes thrust upon them with the decline of state socialism and the violent disintegration of their erstwhile country, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Throughout the book, Thiessen weaves together her powerful ethnography of her informants' struggles in a world changed with a broader analysis of the cultural politics in independent Macedonia. Filled with insights that challenge received wisdom about globalization, nationalism, and the break-up of Yugoslavia, *Waiting for Macedonia* is sure to intrigue.

Beginning in Chapter 1, Thiessen develops the book's core argument, one well worth scholars' attention. Thiessen contends that it was post-1991 anxieties about Macedonia's relationship to "the West"—rather than the repressive nature of socialism or Yugoslav state ideology—that heightened ethnic tensions in the country and encouraged practices more generally concerned with disambiguating the traditional from the modern, the Balkan from the European. According to her analysis, most Macedonians had viewed Yugoslavia as their tether to global modernity and the cosmopolitan world of "Europe." The demise of Yugoslavia and the concomitant proliferation of Western depictions of innate Balkan backwardness were thus experienced by young, urban professionals as an existential assault that mirrored the economic calamity and political uncertainty of the time. In this context, Thiessen argues, new sets of practices that focused on asserting Macedonians' membership in the West thrived, including everything from the increased stereotyping of ethnic Albanians as an anti-modern Other to a desire for pirated movies, designer clothes, and the physique of a fashion model.

Thus, in contrast to much writing on ethnicity in post-socialist contexts, Thiessen argues that it was not socialism that had pent up ethnic antagonisms, but a post-socialist context where Macedonia's place in the narrative of modernity was no longer settled that catalyzed a politics of difference. Thiessen thereby uncovers a potent, but underappreciated, irony of Macedonian cultural politics: as Yugoslavia had offered Macedonians a way to imagine themselves in Europe, nostalgia for the Yugoslav past was in part nostalgia for a European future.

Chapter 2 examines how imaginaries of the urban and the rural intersected in differing narratives of Macedonian nationhood as well as in stereotypes of ethnic difference between Albanians and Macedonians. Significantly, Thiessen emphasizes that while Macedonian narratives of an ethnically exclusive nation—rooted like so many European nationalisms in the celebration of an "authentic" peasant past—did thrive in the early years of independence, they were always countered by a Yugoslav, socialist legacy that celebrated unity and cooperation as

the hallmark of modern statehood and which continued to offer Macedonians a valued model of social life. As Thiessen herself notes, this argument speaks against the tendency present in many studies of the former Yugoslavia to ignore or erase the socialist past.

The next four chapters zoom in on how Thiessen's core group of informants—young, female engineers in Skopje—responded to the political and social environment of the early 1990s. The expectations for personal autonomy and career security, i.e., a “normal, modern life,” that these women had developed over their education were severely compromised in this new context. Chapter 3 probes how shifting designations of modern and backward were employed by women of different generations to map out ideal household relations and sexual relationships as well as to “otherize” groups seen to contrast with these ideals. Chapter 4 examines how young women negotiated the increased intra-familial, financial dependencies as well as the degradation of job quality and workplace relations caused by Macedonia's economic turmoil. Chapters 5 and 6 analyze the young women's desire for designer clothing and use of crash diet and body-sculpting services at this time of political, social, and economic vulnerability. These final two chapters forward an important point. Thiessen argues that women's practices of consumption and body modification should not be cast as imitations of Western styles made available with the fall of socialism. Such an argument erroneously assumes that such goods and images had been alien to life in late Yugoslavia. Rather, Thiessen maintains that “Western” clothing and taut bodies functioned as a political argument directed at an imagined “European” addressee. In response to orientalist depictions of the Balkans circulating in Western Europe, these women made claims to their belonging in Europe, to their “normality,” through an everyday politics of consumption and self-display.

*Waiting for Macedonia* thus offers a commendable number of insightful arguments that could animate rich debate in courses addressing globalization, nationalism, gender, and consumption as well as in courses on postsocialism. Furthermore, Thiessen always uses ethnography to drive her theoretical interventions. Along with her accessible writing style, this aspect of the book particularly recommends it for use with undergraduates.

The book, of course, is not without some flaws. At times, Thiessen is prone to generalizations and the work occasionally reads as social psychology on the scale of the nation. The fact that some patches of the text progress in a disorganized fashion and that some transcriptions from the Macedonian are incorrect by any standard (e.g., *Skopjanici*, instead of *Skopjani*, and *biznis joveks*, which I assume should be *biznis čovek* [a literal translation of “business man”] despite the more common term *biznismen*) suggest that the book may have been rushed to press.

Nonetheless, Thiessen's book masterfully brings to life the everyday struggles young female students and professionals faced in the turbulent years of the late 1980s and early 1990s and frames them in rich analysis that attends to the larger geopolitical context and subtly challenges many of the unquestioned assumptions that haunt writings on globalization, nationalism, and “transition.” The result is a provocative ethnography that not only illuminates the recent history of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but also suggests how anthropologists can

study the everyday effects of economic tumult and changed life trajectories more broadly. To this degree, *Waiting for Macedonia* is not only astute, but timely.