

Conference Report: Ideology in Balkan Anthropological Research.

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Ideology in Balkan Anthropological Research. Conference of the Association for Balkan Anthropology. August 29 - 31, 1996, Sofia - Bankya, Hotel Zeravna. Director: Asen Balikci, assisted by Marianna Draganova and Radoslava Geneva. Sponsors: Wenner-Gren Foundation (New York), Open Society (Sofia), Goethe Institute (Sofia), American Cultural Center (Sofia), Oesterreichisches Ost- und Siidosteuropa-Institut (Vienna and Sofia), Canadian Cooperation Fund.

Professor Balikci's pioneering Association for Balkan Anthropology is receiving growing support in difficult circumstances. As convenor of a stimulating conference, he and his capable assistants are to be congratulated. They deserved the success their hard work brought. Through their efforts, several scores of participants gathered to debate the challenge of social-scientific research, past, present and future, across the greater Balkan region. Underlying questions were: What paths might social scientific inquiry take in the coming years? What are the options? How best can we draw upon regional antecedents, neglected intellectual heritages in all their shades?

My fourth opportunity to engage with Bulgarian specialists at home, on this occasion I enjoyed the involved presence of many younger scholars. Conversely, I register my regret at a general absence of staff from Sofia's powerful Institutes. Why did elder statesmen not respond to the call for papers - and personal invitations - addressing so important a topic as ideology in regional research? What could be more timely, informative and constructive? Their absence was indeed our loss; there were many occasions when State Ethnologists could have added fruitfully to discussions focused upon ethnographic work carried out at the behest of Bulgaria's deposed ruling establishment. Forty years of monopolistic control, Party domination of research findings, rigid interpretation of moral structures past and present, merits informed analysis especially from those who survived the preemptive system and its collapse. Layers of Western assumption and indiscriminate blame do not take us very far in understanding how things got to be as once they were, and how they have come to be what they now are. All anthropologists could have learned from Academicians prepared to address their former involvements. Manipulation of folklore, inculcation

of socialist patriotism, de-religionized ethnography and redesigned customary rituals imposed severe strains on many research staff as well as Bulgarians at large, as we heard several times at this meeting; and not least among those who with difficulty occasionally defied Cultural Management strategies by exploring empirical data from standpoints other than state-ideals of Marxism vs. Capitalism which dominated the Cold War period for everyone, East and West.

Recovery from decades of theoretical restriction constituted a regular talking point during three days of tightly-packed presentations when over forty papers were scheduled for delivery. As emerged with great poignancy in several exchanges, like citizens of many neighboring countries, Bulgarians face frightening problems in the 1990s; however, dogmatic research and teaching programs and the severe command-and-obedience structures they served are not recalled with any nostalgia. I witnessed one Stalinist outburst only, its proponent vociferously defending centralist cultural designs, 'scientific' banishment of 'bad old ways', furtherance of a fixed conception of society rather than the study of developing social relations with all their untidy contentions. From others there was a healthy wish to understand national and transnational processes which had generated dogmatic pasts and coercive administration. Given encouragement - and economic survival which allows time for calm reflection - East European sociological enterprise may get beyond simply debunking variants of national image-making and Leninist dreams, discredited as hard-line tactics now are. Understanding how one's past and present has been shaped is an important part of personal, professional and national self-knowledge.

Delegates with plenty to say both in and out of study sessions represented Albania, Australia, Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States. Reflexive observations were offered by several Westerners who have undertaken extensive fieldwork in southeastern Europe. Sadly, a group of Macedonians, its members set to deliver timely material on area tensions, was not allowed to travel to Sofia. Likewise, specialists from a few regions of former Yugoslavia sent word to say that they would not attend any 'Balkan' conference: they regard the appellation as humiliating, hopelessly

compromised in political discourse. Everyone's loss, once again. That said, I perceived a broad concern of scholars from former Communist countries to develop research paradigms which illuminate changing social relations and new potentials for jealousy, belligerent nationalism or inter-group conflict, to explore research methods which penetrate philosophical ideals and help explain shattered employment expectations, which recognize the advance of global interdependency among other empirical realities, which recognize the impact of communication by electronic media answerable to no government. For many, these things take some getting used to; their processes need to be studied by teams of anthropologists.

In parallel, Western conferees could occasionally appear less earth-bound when they expressed postulates smacking of Marxist idealism untempered by empirical experience; or when, in relativist here-and-now mode, they presumed their audience conversant with the latest 'post-modern' confabulations. Terminological and conceptual niceties are evidently important to skilled practitioners but it was occasionally sobering to hear the unbedazzled of Eastern Europe submit that basically we are (or should be) talking about dynamic aspects of an inexorable general trend: speeded-up social convergence and structural differentiation, diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties of lifestyle as more people are linked to each other in denser chains of interdependence which nowadays include Balkan villagers, the World Bank, multinational companies, the European Union, NATO, Human Rights agencies and consciousness-raising pressure-groups. Life is not so calculable as once it seemed to those who ruled. Structures have changed, as have people's expectations. The hope is that anthropologists will not get arrested by their own wish-driven idealism or excessive description of brightly-colored butterflies (to paraphrase Edmund Leach), which can easily obscure the absence of inquiry into power-tussles which are taking place whether anyone likes them or not. It was certainly recognized that the growing tempo of technological and social adaptation in south-eastern Europe makes inter-generational differences more pronounced; greater pressure now bears on the individual who has to be capable of meeting new challenges, taking on new role definitions, adapting to new functional identities and perhaps irretrievable loss of former status. Current shifts are extremely fast, radical, dramatic, hectic. Many individuals have not had time to get used to fundamental upheavals, which are often accompanied by stress and anxiety. A citizenry psychologically unprepared for legal-institutional and

socioeconomic transformations on such a scale easily perceives change in general as negative and threatening.

Anthropological research can be of service here. We can report suffering wherever it is found so that others may hopefully plan for a better future; we can monitor the pace at which flexible individual identity may perhaps emerge from once-stable social identity; we can help assess whether learned helplessness is to any extent engulfing the potential for self direction; we can report the pace at which those who of late enjoyed special group privileges make room for or block the quest for individual rights as Bulgarians and neighboring peoples assert and redefine their conception of self. Role conflicts there will be as fresh standards develop and are unevenly taken into personal make-up and public sentiment. These processes merit impartial ongoing study, a huge challenge to us all. The problem is not simply to report which side is 'wrong' and which side is 'right' but to analyze structural characteristics of developing relationships so that we all may understand them better.

A substantial amount of time was devoted to ethnographers and geographers of the Balkan peninsula, important map makers of an earlier generation such as Jovan Cvijic, Dinko Tomasic, Milan Ufflay, Baltazar Bogićević, Slobodan Jovanovic. North of the Danube, Romulus Viua and other specialists from Cluj were acknowledged for their achievements, as was the outstanding Romanian school of sociology led by Dimitrie Gusti and many colleagues until house arrests, exiles, labor camps and deaths strangled an internationally-respected enterprise soon after the Communist takeover in the late 1940s. By extension, outside of formal sessions, opportunity was taken to discuss important 1930s-40s documentation by American scholars such as Philip Moseley, Charles Ellwood and Joseph Roucek; these writers, neglected today, drew attention to serious work being done and waiting to be done in Balkan territories.

Nineteenth century legacies of state-making and regional historiography received a great deal of attention in numerous presentations, as did the influence of German folkloristics. Long-run patterns of settlement, regional sentiment and customary celebration were discussed with the benefit of detailed local knowledge. Problems faced by minority and migratory groups were identified, as were challenges faced by all researchers in reporting the relationships of villages with bigger and bigger units of administration in increasingly complex

societies; and changing family structures in zones of Europe where most people have lived on the land and worked close to their homes until very recent times.

Good things to come? I hope so. Asen Balikci's wider project was furthered by the appointment of an international steering committee, by its commitment to publish a regular newsletter, an undertaking to hold next year's conference in Bucharest, and consolidation of collegial operations with the Oesterreichisches Ost- und Sudosteuroopa-Institut at Vienna. Congratulations are in order once more. Further information may be obtained from P.O. Box 175, Sofia 1000, Bulgaria.