

University Seminar 703: Modern Greek

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Clio Meets Alexander the Great: Reassessing the Historiography of the Macedonian Question

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Alexis Radisoglou (Columbia University)

Attendees: Suzy Vuljevic (Columbia), Heather Roberson (Harriman Institute), Joanna Wang (Columbia), Maria Serefi (Onassis Foundation), Noeleen Advani (Columbia), Tom Mallios (NYU), Despina Lalaki (NYU), Karen Van Dyck (Columbia), Stathis Gourgouris (Columbia), Neni Panourgia (Columbia), Anastasia Sikiaridi (Barnard), Myrsini Manney-Kalogera (Columbia)

Abstract for the Presentation:

The negotiation of names, terms and identities has been the central theme in the historiography of the Macedonian Question as early as the mid-19th century. At different points the interested countries, parties or pressure groups produced a vast literature with convenient ethnographic, historical and linguistic arguments that supported their national and political claims in Macedonia. It is argued that this literature indeed is an integral part of the question rather than a pool of sources to seek the truth. The identity debate has been nothing more than a powerful tool used to manipulate a border region.

A complete version of the argument on which this talk was largely based may be found at:

Γούναρης, Βασίλης Κ. Το μακεδονικό ζήτημα από τον 19ο έως τον 21ο αιώνα : Ιστοριογραφικές προσεγγίσεις / **Βασίλης Κ. Γούναρης** · επιμέλεια σειράς **Κώστας Κωστής**. - 1η έκδ. - Αθήνα : **Αλεξάνδρεια**, 2010. - 158σ. · 21x15εκ. - (Θέματα Ιστορίας · 1).

http://www.biblionet.gr/book/153215/Γούναρης,_Βασίλης_Κ./Το_μακεδονικό_ζήτημα_από_τον_19ο_έως_τον_21ο_αιώνα

Summary of Discussion:

Q.

Would you say something more about the Bulgarian national renaissance?

A.

It was a complicated issue right from the beginning. There's a certain point in the mid-19th century during which there arose the difference between the Macedonian, Bulgarian and the Serbian intelligentsia. So you have people coming from Macedonia, who were educated in Russia, at Russian universities; scholarship is produced there, and we also have scholarship produced in Belgrade. So the Russian scholarship is focusing on the Slav character of the Balkans, and yet it is unclear whether there will be an independent Bulgarian state – one day annexed by Serbia – or if there will ever be a Macedonian state. And it's also unclear whether the Macedonians are Serbs or Bulgarians or whether Bulgarians are related to Serbs. All we know is that there is a rising sense of nationalism. Different versions of history are produced; we see the tendency to bring ancient times again into the making of nationhood. Ancient Thracian and Macedonian history is used, but nobody's sure whether this will end up one way or the other.

Q.

I want to come to the question that you raise at the end, the question you obviously pose. The thing is that this is an extreme case of what could have happened to any entity in the Balkan sphere as the Ottoman Empire collapses, insofar as – and I'm going to be a little schematic on purpose – there is a great heterogeneity of identities, religious, ethnic, language, therefore as identities they are already plural. And as a result of the nationalist project they undergo some sort of homogenization. And it seems to me that those histories that we then call national histories are mostly written from outside, or even if they are written by national intellectuals, they are written according to certain prototypes, for example Paparhigopoulos. The issue is that in a sense all the national histories are written from the outside, or top-down as you mentioned, and it seems to me that the problem is, the question you are posing, is almost unanswerable: There are two different kinds of history. The national histories are always codified and follow a certain pattern of homogenization. They have to be. But the histories of the people, those can only be local history, with all of their many ups and downs and various phases of this and that and multiplicities – they are plural...

A.

I absolutely agree. When someone is trying to produce an approach, as a social anthropologist or to write a people's history, and then he selectively uses the sources produced by his generation of historians...

Q.

But has it ever been anything but selective? These ideological and political constructions, despite all of their actual real histories... It's always some sort of history that seems to be partially constructed – or selectively, not partially. No one writes a national history that claims to have the full story.

A.

In general I'm pessimistic, but in this aspect I'm optimistic. The more Ottoman sources

are used (from previous centuries) the better is our view of the society. It's amazing, and it's going on rapidly, thank god. You have tax registers from the 16th century. Amazing, with the names of the people living in every single village! It's a document that cannot be disputed. Again, you have registers in the late 17th century that even describe every single individual living in every village throughout Macedonia. It's an invaluable database. Or you have five or six tax registers with names of people during the 16th centuries, and you can study the name-giving, clans and so on, people moving. And there lies my hope that we may be able to produce a more reliable version.

Q.

Is the Byzantine historiography useful?

A.

It's not, and you know why? Because Byzantine archival sources only refer to regions that were once theirs, i.e. to the regions where the Athos monasteries once had property. So it's a particular part of Macedonia, basically the Greek-speaking zone they refer to. For those parts we have Byzantine sources, not for the rest.

Q.

I am interested in what you said earlier about Macedonia during the 50s and 60s. I wanted to ask: The largest number of people who were interned off the coast... [tape unclear]

A.

There were all the separatists who were classified as more Bulgarian than communist, or so Bulgarian that their communist identity was not strong enough to make them fit to survive.

Q.

I'm more interested in the people who were sent there as Stalinists. But you are saying they were sent there as Stalinists because they were thought of as Bulgarians.

A.

Yes, they were also suspected of pro-Bulgarian links. And they wanted to stabilize this state, that's why also Greek political refugees were important. Because they said we are not Greek and not Bulgarians. And of course they were communists.

Q.

This is more recent: I'm wondering about what you think about the research that is being done, recently, on genetics. On Israel and Palestine, on Macedonia... it's research that has been supported by major research institutions.

A.

[unclear on tape] What is more important is this argument that Slav-speaking Macedonians were Greeks but they learned the Slav language, which was useful. They'd forgotten Greek and used Slav to communicate. And now --whether they are Greek or not it's official history -- the same exact argument is produced in Skopje: that these people were ancient Macedonians, and then of course came the Slavs, and they had to learn the language to communicate with the rest -- again the same theory. I was amazed.

Q.

My question involves museums and all sorts of other groups in Greece who are involved

in education. What is going on in terms of education and history teaching in Greece? What is your prognosis for how things are going to change in terms of the actual national histories?

A.

It's not going to. Give me one good reason why it should change. And tell me who would be the agents for this revision. I mean even diplomats, politicians, they have all been educated into the same context, and they take all these for granted. And we all know the story of Prime Minister Samaras, who was so much influenced by the stories of his family; he grew up in this tradition. Who's going to be the agent of this revisionism? Now, in terms of historiography, of course there is a revision. There is also a revision in terms of national Macedonian historiography in FYROM. But this is produced by German scholars so far. I expect that one day, revision will be accelerated because of their own production, in their Republic. So far, this change has been slow. There is a particular reason: From 1996 onwards, until very recently, there was a law: to do research you had to apply, and only state institutions were allowed to pursue research on matters of defense and safety but also on the national identity and the civilization of the republic and its minorities. So, with the exception of my good friend Keith Brown, who was lucky enough to have access in 1990/1991 when he was there, there were no more social anthropologists who did fieldwork in the Republic on any aspect that had to do with identities or minorities. So this literature is very limited, but I expect it will increase in the process of time. It's a matter of time to produce their own revision, pretty much like the Bulgarians, and the Greeks and the Turks. In Bulgarian history, as we speak, we have articles like, "Big Lies about Bulgarian History," or about the anti-Greek stereotypes that developed during the period of the national revival – that the Greeks burned the books and that's why the Bulgarians were not educated properly-- and so on. They revised all this stuff, which was part of their national education and was in Bulgarian schoolbooks. And, lastly, there is also this production of alternative schoolbooks. There are institutions which try to produce alternative schoolbooks. They are not well received in Greece, of course, and the same holds for other places. My problem is that revision is so delicate an issue, so much manipulated by states, especially when there is a crisis or during domestic fights... As I explained to you, there is this fight between historians in Skopje. One could easily ask, for example, why they have opted for this version of fierce ethnic nationalism, going back to the genes and primordial identities, while in the same way they alienate a part of the population (the Albanians), which is more than a third, it's something like 45 per cent, and it's more than 50 per cent in the younger generations. They produced a past which alienates half of the population, and yet they still do it because it is useful for politics.

Q.

What role has archaeology played?

A.

To start with, it's not just a one-man phenomenon, there were a lot of scholars and archaeologists who did excavations and collected stones and so on. It was also the documentation of history through archaeology. So it was an indispensable chapter of this history right from the beginning. Margaritis Dimitzas produced his book in the 1870s, "Macedonia in Surviving Monuments and Speaking Stones." So they were aware of the

importance of archaeological evidence. To say that archaeology has profited a lot in the 1970s and 80s and 90s because of the political debate (between Athens and Skopje), it's well known. Of course archaeologists are not always willing to admit that. Very important archaeological work is done nowadays in FYROM. They dig holes everywhere. They are seeking one thing, we know that, because it's said: an inscription that is not in Greek [unclear on tape]

Q.

In what direction... [question unclear]

A.

Well, they try to but they can't because they go back and essentially rely on the same kinds of sources. That's the problem. Historians and scientists want to be original, to produce an original argument. But which way are they going to do that? By using what kind of sources? That's why I focused on the Ottoman sources. Of course nowadays it's very difficult to produce something original that has to do with identities and so on. Everything has been deconstructed. It's difficult to produce something original on the question to whom this past belongs. It's a matter of sources, not a matter of will, as far as Western scholars are concerned. Of course you have people in the West [...] the fact that they are Westerners does not mean that they aren't connected with Balkan people. You have Victor Friedman for example, who is a specialist in Macedonian language. He's an excellent linguist but he's a friend of the Macedonian nation, and his mentor was Horace Lunt who built in 1952 the standardizing grammar of the Macedonian language. It's a second-generation academic relationship.

Q.

At the end of the talk, you were talking about history being conducted top-down and then from the bottom up – and I was wondering whether you might reflect a little on the momentum of that famous demonstration in Thessaloniki in 1992. Because sometimes looking back it's unclear the degree to which manipulation of the popular sentiment around that issue and around that demonstration came from the top down, because many were surprised by the size of this demonstration, the feeling towards it, in some ways validating the idea that – when you mentioned Samaras, Penelope Delta – that the popular sentiment as well had its role to play in making history.

A.

You have to keep in mind that the focus of this huge bibliography was the struggle for and about Macedonia in the early 20th century. This struggle is not that far away. My grandmother was a girl of six, seven years old when this took place, and she narrated to me all the stories, and this is true for all families living in Macedonia. So you have a non-stop narration of the struggle, then the narration of the Bulgarian occupation in WWI and WWII. And all these stories of bitterness are part of family history. The museum of the Macedonian Struggle in Thessaloniki is a symbol: People go there and bring photographs of their forefathers who fought in the Struggle to have them stored there and make sure that they're all part of the nation, because they're part of that particular historical chapter, the Struggle for Macedonia. So, they are sensitive because that's their only link with the nation state. If you remove that link, history, there is nothing left. And all of us, we grew up with that. So it's not that difficult to manipulate or to encourage people to join in a

campaign supporting historical rights. In general, history is a sensitive issue for the Greeks, and the history of the Macedonian case is very fresh.

Q.

But the dimensions of that demonstration were not ones that even those who were going to manipulate fully understood when it happened.

A.

But after that they realized.

Q.

Absolutely, but after that also, I think, the scholars and journalists were delinquent for a few years in responding to that. I remember there were academics from Greece who would speak in public one way and over dinner in a completely different way. And even the Left was very timid.

A.

It was a very heated debate, and it was part of Greek politics. In this aspect, what was happening in Greece was not different from what was happening in Sofia or in Skopje. It was useful for politics as well. And it was a bad choice that at that point all the terms were revised.

Q.

This was a particularly unstable period in the Balkans. I think there was a background to the demonstration, all this implicit insecurity about where this would lead. I don't think it would have been possible simply by manipulating, if there hadn't been this recent threat.

Q.

I remember it as well here in the United States. I went along to the demonstration – for various reasons – in Washington D.C., but one of my reasons was because of the precarious Greek strategic position at the time. Even though I disagreed with the Greek government's argument, I was sensitive to the dangers lurking at that historical juncture.

Q.

The other thing I wanted to ask: There was a phase of collaborative meetings of Balkan historians, right, for some kind of collaborative histories?

A.

Yes, and they were produced, it's a four-volume edition. It was not funded by universities. It was funded by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe. It was produced in English. Comparative ways to write Balkan histories. Say, the Balkan Wars from different perspectives. It's very useful. But again, it's not simple enough even for school teachers to teach it. They're excellent but perhaps not suitable for schoolboys and girls at the age of 14 or 15. Certainly we need very much trained professionals, who are very well aware of the details of Balkan history to teach them in classes.

Q.

But education is national education. Even if you were to imagine people writing for that purpose... Primary education is national education. We are talking about the contradiction and conjunction between the scholarly and the popular. And the scholarly work opened up to a real problematization, but the popular work is where it gets very hard, and one reason for this is that the nation is still the form that reigns. For the internationalist to develop with societies that are nationalist... There have to be other

kinds of ideologies that supersede the national. It's self-formation, it's not something that happens against the grain.

Q.

I spent the first years of my life in Naousa. It is a left-wing city. The type of understanding of Macedonia I got from Naousa was very different from the type of understanding other people had, in Thessaloniki, for instance, or Verroia.

A.

What was your understanding?

Q.

I knew about Macedonia that the problem was not with the Bulgarians or anyone else, but that the problem was with the Greek state. So the fear was from within the Greek state, the positions the Greek state was taking.

A.

Yes, the problem was that communism was identified... was linked to the Macedonian question, and used extensively. Communist and Slav threat were identified, and that was very useful for domestic politics in every single village of Macedonia up to now.

Q.

What I was thinking when you were talking about your grandmother or Penelope Delta is that there is another entry point into thinking this, which is the viewpoint of the left-wing, the leftists, whose understanding is different, without identifying themselves with a non-Greek Macedonian necessarily.

A.

But again, you're mistaken in this, that are not just leftists who call themselves ethnic Macedonians. In the recent revival of the Slav Macedonian movement in Greece, they drew a lot from this leftist communist tradition and so on, but there was a limit to that. It is not fully acknowledged that the potential pool of those who support the minority cause is wider; it overlaps with the pool of the conservative party. It is a fact that Slav-speakers left Greece and became communists, but when they were in Greece, before WWII, they supported the king, they were royalists, they were very conservative, very traditional. It even got worse for the minority party when they allied with the Muslim minority. Of course from the leftist party point of view it was helpful. Yes, but not for their conservative supporters!