

first publication

The paper was first presented at the Workshop »Ethnische« Identität, Nation & innere Kolonisierung. Neue Methoden zu einer kulturwissenschaftlichen Erforschung der Habsburger Monarchie und ihrer Literatur/en (1867-1918) in Antwerpen on Dec., 14 and 15, 2001.

1 Lampe, John R./ Jackson, Marvin R.: Balkan Economic History, 1550-1950. From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations. Bloomington: Indiana UP 1982, p. 13.

2 Palaret, Michael: The Balkan economies c. 1800-1914. Evolution without development. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1997.

3 The usufruct of the feudal estates was destined to be used for the equipment of a number of cavalymen. That number was established by Ottoman officials on the basis of the estimated yield of the estate. Increasing the yield of the estate through a more thorough exploitation of the peasants would only result in an increase of the military obligations and by no means benefit the landowner.

›Colonialism‹ is traditionally defined as a political-economic phenomenon, which began about the year 1500, and whereby various European nations discovered, conquered, settled, and exploited large areas of the world. More recently, Wallerstein and others defined ›colonialism‹ to include any enclave economy entirely dependent on the European core-states.¹ The term ›enclave‹, however, emphasising the insulated character of colonies, may be too restrictive. It excludes the conquest and exploitation of Siberia by the Russians, for instance, from being described as colonialism, although the similarities with West European colonialism are striking. Accepting that colonies might as well be adjacent regions, we can wonder whether the Habsburg expansion into Southeast Europe might be considered as a form of colonialism as well. We cannot deal with this question without taking into account also the part of the Balkans conquered by the Ottoman Turks. The Ottoman Empire, as we shall see, throws a particular light on the issue of colonialism in Southeast Europe, in a rather unexpected and contradictory way.

Neither Lampe nor Palaret², the two most authoritative authors on Balkan economic history, have in their indexes an entry ›colonialism‹. This kind of political control and economic exploitation seem to have been absent in the Balkans at first sight. In fact, the term ›colonial‹ was used by many 19th century Balkan authors in order to denote the conditions the Balkan peoples were doomed to live in, especially by the Ottomans. However, this was a rather rhetorical or metaphorical use of the word. Significantly, 19th and early 20th century Balkan authors share all the racist views regarding the so called ›savage‹ people in Africa, Asia and the Americas, that were resorted to in Western Europe in order to legitimate colonial rule. It is obvious these Balkan authors considered themselves to belong to the white, civilised and colonising, European part of the world, rather than to the coloured, primitive and colonised one. When they called their country ›a colony‹ and the policy of the imperial governments towards it ›colonialist‹, this did not imply the slightest form of identification, let alone solidarity with the really colonised people outside Europe.

Attempting to define more accurately what it actually was, if not colonialism, we face an entire range of ways in which domination and oppression in the Balkans was perceived. It is interesting to observe that, while the very mechanism of domination and oppression remained very much the same throughout the ages, the legitimisation of domination and the nature of oppression were perceived in very divergent ways, depending on the concept of state authority prevailing in a particular period of history. What was experienced as illegitimate in one period was perfectly acceptable in another, and *vice versa*.

Balkan historians generally consider the period of Ottoman rule to consist of five centuries of merciless oppression and exploitation. They prefer to call it ›the Turkish yoke‹ (although, curiously enough, according to Kemalist historiography, Ottoman rule was experienced by the Turks too as ›a yoke‹ they succeeded to shake off after World War I). However, the integration of the medieval Balkan principalities in the Ottoman empire was considered to be perfectly legitimate at that time it took place – the 14th and 15th centuries. Conquest was a ›normal‹ means of extending the borders of feudal states. The legitimacy of this kind of violent expansion is further illustrated by the fact that usually local rulers were first made vassals. Later, if they were not sufficiently loyal to the sultan, they were dismissed (and often killed) and their lands were integrated in the so called core provinces of the Ottoman empire. This shows that some rules of what we might call today international law were respected. Moreover, there existed many dynastic relations between Byzantine, Serb, Bulgarian, maybe even Hungarian royal houses and the house of the Ottomans, with all the rights and duties ensuing from them. This again suggests that the domination by the Ottomans was at that time considered as maybe very unpleasant, but perfectly legitimate.

The economic exploitation of the Balkan population in the Ottoman empire was not particularly harsher than in Western and Central European countries where there was no foreign domination. In many respects peasants in the Ottoman empire were even better off. This was due to the fact that till the 18th century, for fiscal reasons the Ottoman land owner was not particularly interested in having the peasants on his estate producing more.³ Moreover, the Ottomans treated the submitted Balkan peoples as ›regular‹ subjects, making no distinction between them and the Turks. To be sure, although the Ottomans displayed a great deal of religious tolerance,



Christians were discriminated against in many respects. However, Muslims originating from the indigenous Balkan population (Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek Muslims etc.) had the same rights as Turkish and Arab Muslims. So here again, the way Ottoman authorities dealt with the local population differs considerably from the way Western European nations treated ›the savages‹ in their colonies.

The conquest of large parts of the Balkans (Hungary, Siebenburgen and the Banate) by the Habsburgs at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th was not considered to be a war of liberation in the modern sense of the word, let alone a war against a colonialist power. The many records of these events describe them rather as a victory of Christianity upon Islam, the fulfilment of the providence of God. From a more political perspective, the conquest appeared to be rather a Reconquista, that means a restoration of the Habsburgs' violated, very ›feudal‹, territorial rights on the lands of the Hungarian crown. Hungary had become an Habsburg possession after the death of the young and childless Ludwik or Lajos II in the battle of Mohács in 1526 against the Ottomans. However, the only part of Hungary which had remained ›free‹ (that means ruled by the Habsburgs) was so called Royal Hungary, coinciding with what is now Slovakia. Hungary proper had been transformed into an Ottoman province; Siebenburgen (or Transilvania) had become an Ottoman vassal state. Not the entire Hungarian nobility agreed that the Habsburg monarchy was the best guarantee for their traditional rights and freedoms. Many of them preferred Ottoman suzerainty to Habsburg absolutism. The military campaigns, resulting in the *Treaty of Karlowitz* in 1699 and the *Treaty of Passarowitz* in 1718, gave back to the Hungarian nobility their former possessions, but did not restore the former Hungarian independence. The Habsburgs had to cope with a number of insurrections of Hungarian nobles and finally had to give Hungary – or rather the Hungarian nobility – a large extent of autonomy.

My point is that neither the recognition of the Habsburg claims to the lands of the Hungarian crown, nor their rejection had anything to do with the notion of colonial domination of Hungary by the Habsburgs, nor with a kind of anti-colonial resistance against the Habsburg domination. The whole issue was perceived within the framework of traditional feudal rights. For the peasant population, to mention them as well, there was hardly any difference between Ottoman or Habsburg exploitation.

There were, nevertheless, in the course of Southeast European history some developments which could be characterised in some way as ›colonial‹. Curiously enough, the term ›colony‹ seems to be matching most plausibly to one of the allegedly colonising empires itself, namely the Ottoman Empire. As a result of the so called capitulations – a strange name for peace treaties, reached between the Ottoman Empire and Western nations –, from the 17th century on the Ottoman Empire became more and more dependent, politically and even more economically, on the Western European powers. The situation was quite paradoxical. On the one hand, there was an increasing, brutal interference in Ottoman economy by Great Britain, France, and later Germany, while on the other hand the same powers supported the Ottoman empire defending its territorial integrity against Habsburg and mainly Russian expansionism. Their financial, diplomatic and sometimes even military aid was offered only in exchange for commercial concessions that stimulated the export of agricultural products from the Ottoman provinces to the West and the import of cheap industrial products to the Ottoman empire. The latter finally destroyed the Ottoman inner market of manufactured products, and made the Empire even more dependent on the West. The increasing demand for agricultural products in the West resulted in an increasing exploitation of peasants population in some parts of the Balkans. The *Tanzimat* (Reforms) the Western powers imposed on the Empire in the 19th century aimed to transform it into a modern Western state, but in fact only consolidated Western control of the Ottoman institutions.

Local revolts of the Christian population were seized as an opportunity to impose new reforms which further weakened the central authority and increased the great powers' ability to interfere in Ottoman affairs. The new independent states in the Balkans were hardly any better off. They actually replaced Western domination through Ottoman administration with immediate Western domination. The most notorious example is Greece, whose first decades of existence as an independent state are labelled by historians the *xenokratia* or ›xenocracy‹: the rule of the foreigners. While the king was a Bavarian, France, Britain and Russia had their own political parties, which actually worked more for the promotion of the national interests of their respective protectors than for the prosperity of the Greeks. The fate of Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania was not very different: all these countries increasingly fell under the political and economic control



4 Malcolm, Noel: *Bosnia. A Short History*. London: Macmillan 1994, p. 137f.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

6 Todorova, Maria: *Imagining the Balkans*. New York, Oxford: Oxford UP 1997, p. 16.

7 Said, Edward: *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1978.

8 Todorova 1997, p. 20.

of one or another Western power, while formally preserving their independence. After World War I, the colonial policy of the Western powers culminated in the partition of the remainders of the Ottoman empire in Asia Minor. The former Ottoman lands were about to be colonised in the most true sense of the word, that means to be submitted to direct administration by the Western nations, had not Kemal Atatürk mobilised the Turkish nationalist forces and thwarted the Western plans by establishing the Turkish republic.

The Austro-Hungarian protectorate in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the way it was materialised also in many respects remind us of the colonialist policy of Western European powers elsewhere in the world. First of all, the establishment of the protectorate in 1878 and later, in 1908, the formal annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by the Dual Monarchy, had no legitimisation at all in some ancient feudal territorial rights: it was pure expansionism and power politics. It is an intriguing question whether the abandonment of traditional legal justification was facilitated by the fact that Bosnia-Herzegovina was perceived as a region with an outspoken oriental and consequently ›backward‹ character. This perception might have produced a new kind of justification, this time a purely colonialist one? Anyhow, it occurred for the first time. Even the Habsburg complicity in the partition of Poland by the end of the 18th century was legitimised by some ancient, greatly invented Hungarian feudal claims on Galicia.

The real incentive to proceed to the establishment of the protectorate were the rich resources of the region (agriculture, forestry and minerals) and the aim to create one economic unit with Dalmatia, which was already Austrian at that time. Decisions concerning the administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina were made by the common (Austro-Hungarian) *Ministry of Finance*. The civil administration did not employ Turkish officials or Bosnian (Serb or Croat) natives, but Austro-Hungarian citizens. The Ottoman administrative structure was kept in place, but was Austro-Hungarianised in name and personnel. Significantly, Noel Malcolm, describing the fate of Bosnia-Herzegovina under Austro-Hungarian rule, compares the *Bezirksvorsteher* to the Deputy Commissioner in British India.⁴ It should be emphasised, however, that Bosnia-Herzegovina was never turned into a real colony. The reasons are manifold. Till 1908, it was administered by Austria-Hungary, but formally remained a part of the Ottoman empire, which might have refrained the Austro-Hungarian government from taking radical measures. More important might have been the fact that the Croat and Serb populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina rapidly got involved in Austro-Hungarian internal politics and thus obscured the status of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a separate unit, especially after 1908. Finally, Austro-Hungary was just not capable of efficiently carrying out a colonialist policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina: it had no experience in administering enclaves, but on the contrary, a long history of integrating more or less separate units in a larger whole. Every recognisable aspect of the Austro-Hungarianisation of Bosnia-Herzegovina was the increase of the number of officials governing the province from 120 under Ottoman rule to more than 9.500 in 1908.⁵

What actually existed in the Balkans and Anatolia in the 19th century was a kind of ›semi-‹ or ›quasi-colonialism‹. The freedom of the independent Balkan nations was a fiction which disguised a reality of economic extortion, oppression and manipulation; simultaneously, these nations were systematically dragged into the Western Great Powers' ›spheres of influence‹, although the legalistic distinction with genuine colonies remained till the end.⁶ This ›semi-colonialism‹ matches amazingly well into the general, albeit rather simplistic picture of the Balkans as a political and cultural transitional zone, a ›semi-‹area between Europe and Asia. The Balkans are also ›semi-oriental‹. For that reason it was neither included in the Orient Said dealt with in his book *Orientalism*⁷, nor explored by the ›guild of Orientalists‹ he criticises. The Balkans could also be labelled ›semi-Christian‹, as many Balkan peoples professed oriental or Orthodox Christianity. This made them part of Christendom, but at the same time excluded them from (West) European Christendom, which was limited to Catholicism or Protestantism.

As Said has shown, there exists a close relationship between colonialism and orientalism, between being colonized and being perceived as Oriental. The Balkans, having been but semi-colonised, is perceived consistently as semi-oriental. The Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova, who has lived in the United States for the last ten years or so, proposed the term ›Balkanism‹ to denote the biased image of the Balkans – similar to ›Orientalism‹, but different in a number of crucial instances. One of these differences is – according to Todorova⁸ – precisely ›the absence of a colonial legacy (despite the often exploited analogies)‹. About the oriental character and the religious idiosyncrasies of the Balkans she writes:



9 Ibid.

10 On the Western perception of the Balkans, cf. also Goldsworthy, Vesna: *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of Imagination*. New Haven, London: Yale UP 1998.

11 Ash, Timothy Garton: *The Uses of Adversity*. Cambridge: Granta Books 1989, p. 166.

›The Balkans‹ predominantly Christian character, moreover, fed for a long time the crusading potential of Christianity against Islam. Despite many attempts to depict its (Orthodox) Christianity as simply a subspecies of oriental despotism and thus as inherently non-European or non-Western, still the boundary between Islam and Christianity in general continued to be perceived as the principal one. Finally the construction of an idiosyncratic Balkan self-identity, or rather of several Balkan self-identities, constitutes a significant distinction: they were invariably erected against an ›oriental‹ other.⁹

Thanks to its semi-character, the Balkans have greatly escaped from becoming an object of ›orientalism‹. Nevertheless, they have often been considered as a region outside Europe. It is significant, for example, that many anthropologists, whose field of research used to be Africa, Asia and the Americas, have recently discovered the Balkans and apply scientific methods, developed in the former colonies, to this region. No one would ever think of studying ethnic conflicts in Western Europe in that way. Nevertheless, the Balkans are as often perceived as an – albeit peripheral area – within the European space.

In a very paradoxical way, however, the Balkans also suffered from not being labelled as ›oriental‹. As a consequence, it could not benefit from the political correctness the Orient was approached with – at least till the 11th of September 2001. Balkanism – the biased Western perception of the Balkans – also results from Western political correctness remaining limited mainly to coloured and especially black people, people professing non-Christian creeds and especially Islam, and people living in or originating from former colonies. The Balkan nations, being white and Christian, and living in states that never were colonies in the legal sense of the word, seem to be excluded from a politically correct treatment and can be described without much restraint as bloodthirsty barbarians involved in age-old, completely irrational tribal quarrels. Notice the world ›tribal‹, so frequently used in the Western media, which is borrowed straight from a colonialist vocabulary. Notice also the tendency to essentialise violence and irrationality as an innate and ineradicable feature of Balkan mentality – a point of view that no self-respecting commentator would dare to express in regard to people in other parts of the world. This essentialist approach soothingly obscures the legacy of semi-colonialism and the responsibility of the European powers in creating spheres of influence and stirring up ethnic hatred.¹⁰

It would be interesting to go more deeply into the image of the (Ottoman) Balkans in Austrian, Hungarian and Central European historiography, ethnography and political thinking. I was deceived to discover that some proponents of ›the Idea of Central Europe‹ in the 1980s, like Milan Kundera and even Václav Havel – with the notable exception of György Konrád – were eager to adopt the biased vision of the Balkans, so popular in Western Europe since the beginning of the 20th century. They treat the Balkans as essentially not-European, at variance to the essential Europeanness of Central Europe, or completely neglected the Balkans in their survey of the European space, as being so alien they were not even worth while to be taken into account. The aim was of course to emphasise the cultural unity between Western and Central-Europe by constructing a shared ›other‹. In the meantime, the main ›other‹ remained Russia, which was also radically excluded from Europeanness – quite inappropriately, as Timothy Garton Ash¹¹ argued.

It seems to us that the term ›colonialism‹ is not appropriate to characterise the political and economic relations between the Habsburg and the Ottoman governments and the nations living in both empires. In the 19th century there transpires a kind of semi-colonialism – which remains to be defined more accurately – in the relations between Western European nations and the Ottoman empire and its successor states. Without any doubt, this semi-colonialism has influenced the very complex and biased Western perception of the Balkans called ›Balkanism‹. The Balkans remain a region, oscillating between ›us‹ and the ›others‹, inciting to a negative attitude in both cases.

Prof. Dr. Raymond Detrez (born 1948) teaches Eastern European (Cultural) History at the Univ. of Ghent (Belgien). His scholarly interests lie especially in the history of the Balkans during the 19th and 20th century.
contact: raymond.detrez@rug.ac.be