

With this speech, the Croatian author Boris Buden opened the Balkan Case Challenge 2010 held in Vienna from 5 to 10 July 2010. This annual competition, supported by ERSTE Foundation, aims at opening up opportunities and new perspectives for excellent students from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia through strengthening links between higher education and employment and by the provision of concrete job opportunities. In addition, the Balkan Case Challenge contributes to an increased awareness about the potentials of South Eastern Europe – being an integrative part of a joint Europe.

Boris Buden

What to do with the question: “What will the Balkans look like in 2020?”

The question I am confronted with and expected to answer is very simple: “What will the Balkans look like in 2020?”. Unfortunately, I cannot answer this. In fact, nobody can answer such a question. We still cannot predict the future. It is, nevertheless, a good question because it addresses an almost forgotten dimension of time – the future. So, regardless of how we answer the question, it is a sign of something new. It already belongs to the future it seems to ask about. Just to remind you: Philosopher and art critic Boris Groys once defined post-communism as a historical condition that is essentially shaped by the move “back from the future,”¹ meaning that with the fall of communism the dimension of the future has lost its historical importance and its power to transform reality, not only in former communist countries but worldwide. To put it more concretely, post-communism is a condition in which our perception of reality is no longer influenced by the future.

¹ See B. Groys, A. v. d. Heiden, P. Weibel (ed.), *Zurück aus der Zukunft. Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2005.

This obviously doesn't apply any more. We are now asked again to look at the world from a futural perspective and to include a sort of prospective imagination in our perception of the actual reality: "What this reality would look like in the future?" Questions like this are clearly a symptom of historical change. Something new is expected to emerge. But, on the other hand, what is it that has come to an end? The historical condition we have hitherto called post-communism?

Hopefully we haven't yet forgotten that, not so long ago, the end of communism was also defined as the end of utopia. Accordingly, the post-communist world was perceived at the same time as post-utopian, that is, as a world in which the socially formative power of utopia had been exhausted. But now the future is back. Does this mean that utopia has returned too? Or rather, had it ever disappeared? And finally, what do the Balkans have to do with all of this?

It is at this point that I would like to remind you of an event that happened near Vienna seven years ago. The late Harald Szeemann, legendary curator of Documenta V in 1972, and famous inventor of the so-called *Grossausstellung*, the great exhibition, in which art works are put together around some central concept. In this case here, the Balkans was the central concept of an exhibition at *Sammlung Essl* in Klosterneuburg with the title *Blood and Honey*². The subtitle was even more curious: *Future's in the Balkans*.

I hope that you have already noticed a "slight" difference in meaning. What was at stake in this exhibition was not the future of the Balkans, as addressed in our initial question, but rather the Balkans as future. Whose future, you might ask – well, the future of all of us, of the world in which we live, the future as such.

Harald Szeemann suggested conceiving the Balkans as having some exemplary quality for the rest of the world. The message his exhibition appeared to deliver is clear: look at the Balkans as a place that you can catch a glimpse of your future and even learn how to shape it. However, one cannot but question whether he really meant that the West too should learn from the Balkans and regard them as an example for its future? He did indeed. He pointed to the Balkans as the future

² May–September 2003.

of the West and certainly not in a cynical sense. In other words, Szeemann recognized in — or better yet, projected onto — the Balkans some sort of utopian potentiality. We can even go a step further and argue that his art project, the above mentioned exhibition in Klosterneuburg, was an attempt to revive the very idea of Utopia — by situating it nowhere else but in the Balkans.

Let's put aside all the possible reasons for such a rediscovery of Utopia precisely in this part of the world, and consider its blatant contradiction to the proposal formulated in our opening questions, namely to imagine the future of the Balkans. It looks like we are dealing with two mutually exclusive perspectives on one and the same region here. The one is forged by artistic imagination and is seemingly totally detached from the reality on the ground— usually perceived in terms of an overall backwardness—where the Balkans appear as the future of the West. The other perspective is one that motivates us to contemplate the future of the Balkans and seems to implicate precisely the opposite: that the West is the future of the Balkans. In the second perspective, we are expected to project the region's future development from the standpoint of the West, which functions as its role model. From here, it looks like we are standing with both feet firmly on the ground, facing reality as it really is. Indeed, this perspective can be easily verified by this reality. It has been even institutionalized.

Explaining its policy regarding “Balkan Region,” the U.S. Department of State explicitly emphasizes the task to help the states of the region “cement peace and build stability and prosperity [...] by their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO and the EU.” It also welcomes the “tremendous progress” the Balkan region has made in “implementing democratic, economic and defense-related reforms on the path to a Euro-Atlantic future.”³

Here, there is no doubt about the future of the Balkans. We already see the Balkan Mountains bathing in the Atlantic Ocean. What is even more curious is that we may even consider this vision a realistic one.

But let's first clarify what we actually mean when we talk about the Balkan region. Instead of answering this question directly I share an anecdote.

³ <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/balkans/>

More than ten years ago I took part in a public discussion in Amsterdam, along with Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić and Maria Todorova, a Bulgarian (and also American) historian and the author of *Imagining the Balkans*, which is probably the best book about this topic published so far.⁴ The topic of our discussion was — what else could it be — the Balkans. At one point the moderator, a Dutch anthropologist, asked each of us to take a pointer to show the borders of the Balkans on a large map of Europe that was hanging behind us. We all started to laugh spontaneously and openly refused to do this. Why? The Balkans are not simply a geographical region of Europe that one can clearly demarcate on a map. Instead, they are a figure of exclusion, a highly abstract cultural and ideological concept that, precisely because it is ideological, has real effects indeed.

According to Todorova notions such as “Balkanism” or “Balkanization” are *Schimpfwörter* — as she writes in the German original — disparagements used to designate, I quote, “a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian.”⁵ They are in fact newly constructed concepts that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century during the Balkan Wars 1912-13, at a time when Europe was outraged by their atrocities and were simultaneously deeply convinced of its own cultural superiority. Todorova quotes Mary Edith Durham, a British anthropologist and traveller from that time, who commented on the Balkan Wars: “War is so obscene, so degrading, so devoid of one redeeming spark, that it is quite impossible there can ever be a war in West Europe.”⁶ These words were written only a year before the outbreak of World War I.

To put it in short: in Western imagination the Balkans are “the other of Europe,” a region inhabited by people who, as Todorova writes, “do not care to conform to the standards of behaviour devised as normative by and for the civilized world.”⁷

⁴ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

What are the Balkans then? A *Schimpfwort* for backwardness or a new Utopia? A provincial periphery of the West whose only dream is a metropolitan Western future? Or a utopian place where the West can finally recover from its decadence?

Let us try to resolve this contradiction by introducing another concept of exclusion that is not only broader than the notion of the Balkans, but has also a more political meaning— the concept of East, which has also been constructed as an excluded opposite of the West. However, I am here not using the concept of East in Orientalist terms as an exotic and imaginary realm of the West — Todorova clearly distinguish Balkanism from Orientalism⁸ — but rather in terms of its post-communist context and the way it has been used since 1989. Here, the East primarily refers to the post-communist East, a part of the World that, because of its communist totalitarian past, had diverted from the “normal” historical path to democracy, economic prosperity and cultural excellence, the path of the West.

Here, I would like to remind you that already in 1990 Jürgen Habermas, probably the most prominent German philosopher living today, defined the so-called democratic revolution in Eastern Europe that brought an end to historical communism as the “catching up revolution” (also a “rewinding revolution”).⁹ He is referring here to a revolution that clears the way for catching up with the lag in development in comparison to the West. Concretely, what had been lagging in the East was modernist development. Now after 1989, that is, after the removal of the Communists, as Habermas believes, the Eastward expansion of modernity can be resumed, and the East—conceived as a space of “belated modernism”— can finally catch up with the West.

Now we see that the concept of the East is a way the former Cold War divide has survived after the year 1989. “Eastern” means “still eastern,” that is, that eastern modernism is belated, which in relation to the West, is made particular, specific and localised. However, on the other side, Western modernism is not only always already in its proper place, it is also always on time. In other words, as Slovenian

⁸ Ibid., 10-12.

⁹ “*Die nachholende*” or die “*rückspullende Revolution*.” See Jürgen Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990, p. 203.

philosopher Rastko Močnik points out, it is “timeless, canonic, general, it is a non-space, since it is a norm, a measure against which the peripheral, the provincial is to be measured.”¹⁰ According to Močnik the East-West divide is an ideological phenomenon. Its ideological function is to rob both sides of their history: the West appears as emancipated from its own history, in fact, from any history, which is why it can be imposed as general and canonic. For Močnik, the West takes on the form of a real existing utopia. Contrary to this, the notion of the East functions as form of amnesia, for its *telos*, that is, the goal to be reached in the future, is to get rid of history, to become an a-historical non-space like the West. Its own history is what makes the East peripheral, provincial, in short, the East. As Močnik writes, the East “has a history that would be better forgotten.” The result is that within the West-East divide, which has survived the fall of Communism in the form of “belated modernism” of the East, the East robs both sides of their common history and prevents them both from having a common history in the future. To quote Močnik: “It freezes them into an eternal unequal couple, one part of which is forever doomed to struggle to get rid of its phantom past, while the other is bound to an everlasting autistic celebration of its idiocy.” The East is thus doomed to struggle for recognition, and the form of this struggle is called identity. Again, Močnik writes: “An identity is the ambiguous privilege of those doomed to remain local, particular, peripheral: it is a euphemism for the incapacity to attain the serene firmament of universality.”

So both the Balkans and the East have an identity. Both are determined by their cultural particularity, which only makes sense in relation to the West, which is supposed to be universal.

This is what we should have in mind when confronted with the question of the future of the Balkans. It is a normative question and, in this sense, is also merely a rhetorical question, which we are supposed to answer by complying with typically Western, democratic, inclusivist norms. We are expected to know precisely what the Balkans should look like in ten years: it should look like Europe, like the West. This is also what already limits our imagination in

¹⁰ See Rastko Močnik, “Will the East’s past be the West’s future?”, in Caroline David, (ed.), “Les frontières invisibles”, Oostkamp: Stichting Kunstboek, 2009.

advance. What we are dealing with here is a future that can only be imagined in distinctly teleological terms, that is, in terms of its pre-given goal. The Balkans and the East should become Europe and/or the West.

Thus, the only question that is to be answered and, as such, still leaves some room for our imagination is —how? How are the Balkans going to become the West?

The first strategy to achieve this can be called cloning. The Balkans are included in the West as its clone or, if you like, as its carbon copy. The best example of this way of becoming the West is demonstrated in the case of a Serbian boy that briefly appeared the news. In an article with the title “Blogging Belgrade boy takes on Serb nationalists,”¹¹ BBC presented a video clip showing 12 year-old Rastko Pocesta introduce himself in perfect English in a room decorated with the flags of the United States and European Union in front of a row of books (he wrote himself) about the American Presidents (*The Hall of Presidents*), Barack Obama, etc. The voice tells us: “I live in Belgrade and I am a human rights activist fighting for justice and equality in Serbia and the World. I support the independence of Kosovo, I support the EU and NATO and Serbian membership in these organizations, [...] EU means economic stability and prosperity while NATO means security [...]” What we have heard and seen is a perfectly—one could even say, professionally—summarized dream of an ideal Serbia, which is however a Western dream. It seems as though the Western policy for the “Balkan Region,” as presented in the U.S. Department of State’s statement quoted above, has been spoken by an original voice from below. The fact that it is the voice of a child only discloses the patronizing character of that dream—the dream of a fresh new start from scratch. What is at stake here is the phenomenon we might call repressive infantilization, which is typical for the societies that have recently liberated themselves from communism.¹²

¹¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8640434.stm>

¹² “The human being as a political child offers itself as the almost perfect subject of a democratic restart. Untroubled by the past and geared totally to the future, it is full of energy and imagination, compliant and teachable. It emanates freedom as though its pure embodiment, but actually it is not free at all. A child is dependent; it must be guided and patronized by adults. However, this only makes it all the more suitable for serving society, as the perfect ground for a new beginning. It neutralizes all the contradictions

So, in this case, we have seen how the Balkans have directly become the West. However, this is a utopia in a completely vulgar sense, that is, a utopia of absolute inclusion, conceived of as a repetition that produces no difference whatsoever. The Other of the West becomes the West without leaving any traces of its particularity behind. It has simply melted down. The voice of the Balkans directly becomes the voice of the West, that is, its master's voice. This is why we cannot even call it submission, for submission would imply a sort of relation. There is no relation whatsoever here. Instead, it is a cloning: the future of the Balkans becomes a Western clone.

However, since we haven't reached this supra-natural level of simple cloning yet, there are other strategies that are more within the realm of human possibility.

The most well-known one is the so-called struggle for recognition. It employs an old Hegelian concept of originally to explain the relation between the slave and his master. A slave who cannot liberate himself by directly defeating the master engages in a long struggle for recognition that finally ends with the abolition of the master-slave relation and with the establishment of their equality within the common concept of "universally human." Nowadays, so-called identity politics has adopted the idea of being a struggle for recognition, which is understood in terms of struggles of excluded, suppressed identities for their final inclusion in what is conceived as universal — for instance, the struggle of women for full equality with men, or the struggle of people of colour for equality with whites, to be included in the concept of the "universally human."

A perfect example of this struggle is provided in the above-mentioned book *Imagining the Balkans* by Maria Todorova. To offer a brief recap, the author

that the sudden irruption of freedom lays bare in society, above all between those who rule and the ruled. There is no relation of domination that seems so natural and self-evident as the one between a child and its guardian, no mastery so innocent and justifiable as that over children. One does not take their freedom away, but suspends it temporarily, postpones it, so to speak, for the time being. A patronized child as political being enjoys a sort of delayed freedom. And in case one day the promise of freedom turns out to be a delusion, one can always say that it was just a children's fairy tale." Boris Buden, "Children of postcommunism", *Radical Philosophy*, January/February 2010, http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2369&editorial_id=28990. For German version see: Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009, p. 35.

explains the Balkans as a cultural concept of exclusion and suppression. She also reveals the complicity of imperial politics in forging this concept and with it the introduction of a frontier dividing the civilized parts from the barbarian parts of Europe. She writes, “the Balkans serves as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and 'the West' has been constructed.”¹³

Nonetheless, Todorova concludes her book with a sort of plea: “If Europe has produced not only racism but also antiracism, not only misogyny but also feminism, not only anti-Semitism, but also its repudiation, than what can be termed Balkanism has not yet been coupled with its complementing and ennobling antiparticle.”¹⁴ In fact it is a plea for a sort of cultural translation in the sense that American feminist philosopher Judith Butler uses it, namely as a model for cultural universality. To put it simply: people of colour had been excluded from the idea of the “universally human” and, consequently, they were also excluded from the public political life in the West. So, by putting pressure on this concept of universality — in a political struggle — they succeeded, gained acceptance and, at least constitutionally, the same rights as white people, which ultimately altered the very idea of what is universally human. Similar processes took place for other minorities, such as Jews, to women, who even in some most developed countries of the West only few decades ago had not had equal rights with men. In a similar way Todorova expects that the Balkans, as a figure of cultural exclusion, will undergo this same process of inclusion of an excluded outside (of the West) and, in that way, push the existing concept of universality forward, in terms of its inclusivity, equality, justice—in short, in terms of democracy.

To put it clearly: I am not talking about the traditional concept of translation that is based on the primacy of an original context, that is, obsessed with the idea of the original while conceiving the translation as its secondary product. Instead, the notion of translation I am thinking of here provides a model for forging a certain type of cultural generality or universality. Concretely, this means that as the figure of a previously excluded cultural identity, precisely by way of cultural

¹³ Todorova, *op. cit.* 188.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

translation, the Balkans successfully become part of—and thereby ultimately change—the concept of cultural universality. The Balkans don't simply become the West, as in the case of cloning, instead they influence and transform the West. In short, including the Balkans also means that the West, or more precisely its concept of universality, is changed too. Translation is a repetition that produces differences both in the translation as well as in the so-called original.

But was that ever a problem?

In fact, Todorova's plea for European recognition of the Balkans was soon fulfilled, literally a few years later (the book was published 1997), at least within the European art scene. In only one year, there were three large and quite ambitious exhibitions of art from the Balkans in Austria and Germany: *In Search of Balkania* (October–December 2002), curated by Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, and Peter Weibel at Neue Galerie Graz, Graz, Austria; the already mentioned exhibition by Harald Szeemann in Klosterneuburg; and finally *In the Gorges of the Balkans* (August–November 2003), curated by René Block at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany.

So the Balkans, as a label for a certain style of art-making – let us call it here pejoratively “Balkan art” – has been already included. It has already succeeded in entering the Western art system as a Western art commodity. The problem with this strategy is that it doesn't even conceive of the Balkans as a problem—for, it is the market and its own dynamics that finally appear as a solution to all problems—and this is clearly another utopian moment too.

In conclusion, the Balkans are in fact not a problem, and more concretely, the inclusion of the Balkans into what is called Europe or the West today, is already underway.¹⁵ So the future of the Balkans seems to be obvious as well. Why then

¹⁵ In fact, Todorova emphasizes that the Balkans have always already been Europe, moreover, that precisely what we call Balkanization is in fact only a symptom of an Europeanization: “From this point of view the Balkans were becoming European by (...) assuming and emulating the homogeneous European nation-states as the normative form of social organization.” Ibid., p. 13. Todorova also explains the last Yugoslav wars in the 1990s that have been widely ascribed to some Balkan essence —tribalism, primitivism, Balkan violence, nationalism, etc. —as the ultimate Europeanization of the Balkans.

are we asked about this future, if we already know the answer; if another answer than the expected cannot be imagined at all?

Good old Althusser, a French Marxist and ideology theorist called it interpellation: by feeling addressed by this question and identifying with an attempt to answer it, we automatically become subjects of an ideologically already structured historical process. Concretely, we start to think of ourselves as those who actively make this process—in our case, the process of Westernization of the Balkans—happen. In terms of a social structure, this means that we automatically identify with Balkan elites, who are believed to be the ones that are naturally called to accomplish the task of becoming Western.

On a more intellectual level—let’s call it the level of knowledge production—by attempting to answer the question about the future of the Balkans we assume the role of the so-called native informant, whose task is to represent the Balkans and inform the European audience about some specific Balkan experience. The figure of the native informant, as is well known, comes from anthropological fieldwork. The task of the native informant was to supply “indigenous knowledge” to colonial subjects, and thus to facilitate exchange between the metropolis and the nation or country of origin.

The figure of the native informant, or more precisely, of the “foreclosed native informant” is featured in Gayatri Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.¹⁶ She argues, in short, that the planetary humanism that emerges with the Enlightenment and founds its theoretical foundation in the European ethical philosophical tradition of Kant, Hegel and Marx, foreclosed native informant as the condition of its possibility. For Spivak, a native informant is a necessary complicity in the humanist knowledge production. It is a character that stands in for an imaginary or absent figure—in our case this would be “a true Balkan identity.” In other words, there is no innocent knowledge production. We must therefore become aware of its complicity with imperialist or neo-imperialist

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge MA, London, E: Harvard University Press, 1999.

projects, or to quote Spivak, “to acknowledge a responsibility toward the trace of the other, not to mention toward other struggles.”¹⁷

I hope it has become clear now what we have to do when confronted with the question “What will the Balkans look like in 2020?”. We shouldn’t even try to answer it.

¹⁷ Ibid., 198.