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Hidden minorities and modernization in South East Europe**¹

In this paper I intend to argue that due to “belated modernization” of the South-East Europe countries, the concept of “national minority” is inappropriate and useless in the approach of hidden minority issue (Promitzer, 2009).

First, I will explore the way in which the rural society, subject to ongoing modernization, has assimilated the concept of nation, imposed as a modernizing program by someone from the central elite. Then, I will review anti-modernization reactions drawn up also by the upper political elite, based on an „interpretative language” which modified the content of the national building-up project (Rizescu, 2000). Although this discourse has directly referred to “people” and “nation”, it was fully exterior to the majority of rural society. Core source of this parallel discourse must be therefore sought in other directions, namely considering the feeling of peripheral modernization, in frustrations of central elites of being “internally colonized” (Hechter, 1975). Reference to political elites in countries of post-colonial system tries to better stress this argument. In the ending part, I try to argue in which way the modernization course, complying with the national pattern in South East Europe, makes useless the concept of “national minority”. The volume *Cultural Intimacy* by Michael Herzfeld thus represents the core reference in this respect.

Such multifaceted perspective could be motivated in cases of at least some of the hidden minorities. Labeling as minority is, if not rejected from the very beginning, at least empty of its content, relativized and sometimes transformed in its opposite. Aromanians, for instance, a group of population of South East Europe whose elite tried, along with the other local Balkan elites, to

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draw up an ethnical identity based on the pattern of political nation (Peyfuss, 1994), seems today, just due to this reason, as a „minority behaving as a majority” (Kahl, 2002). The *Rudars* of Bulgaria strongly oppose to be identified with the “Roma minority”, preferring either an ethnical identity based on mother tongue, Romanian, or one based on the country where they live (Șerban, 2007). Catholics/Tchangos of Moldavia use an ingenious scheme to avoid a minority labeling, saying, whilst on the entire country scale they are indeed a “minority”, in the local society, in counties where they live, they are in fact a “majority” (Șerban, 2004).

On one hand, I do not deny that many of the groups with hidden identities are even today deprived of institutions, mechanisms and capacity to preserve their native culture, everyday life customs, a satisfactory level of mental balance, and eventually somatic certainty (Herzfeld, 1997: 20). The members of such groups were among the first victims of imposing modernization, either meaning their “disempowerment” and transformation – along with the social majority – into a mass of “peasant-citizens”², or civil wars and ethnical conflicts involved them, with no free will from their side.

On the other hand, I try to substantiate discussions, in their case, of ethnicity impregnated with political power elements and of its affiliated culture, as these have resulted following the modernization in line with national pattern. The notion of “minority (national)” contains in itself the latter elements and together with them both the failure of the state nation and, most seriously, resentments and frustrations arising thereof, which have been transformed by a part of the elite (especially intellectual) from the political capital city into an anti-modernizing, ultra-nationalist discourse. Speeches on ethnical “purity”, national “superiority”, on the “people” etc., are not related to the state of proteic, mobile societies, of South East Europe. In each country of South East Europe, such discourses mean intellectual performances of some elites which ascribed them to “common people” (Creed and Ching, 1997: 29).

The “poly-centric state” pattern adequate to ethnic boundaries and cultural organization difference, sketched by Fredrik Barth (1998), has little compatibility with the “national state” pattern that was the model for modernization in South East Europe within the last two centuries. Although they do not refer to the Fredrik Barth’s ethnicity concept, scholars approaching the genealogy of hidden minorities’ concept draw also attention that in the context of political and cultural modernization in South East Europe, the nation pattern was a dissonant one. To this meaning, Christian Promitzer, for instance, outlines that the Ottoman Empire promoted at local

² Recent papers on this theme follow the classical book of Eugen Weber, *La fin des terroir* (Weber 1976).

level a policy of self-governing in the form of *milet*, which made the Western pattern of nation be confronted with a powerful resistance when it has been selected by political elites as an alternative to the modernization (Promitzer, 2009). This is a fundamental difference given the West European countries where the nation meant the community of citizens irrespective of their ethnic belonging. South East European pattern is somehow close to the Germany and Austria cases, Promitzer notices.

Remarks that Promitzer makes in relation to *milet* term mirror the suggestive and mobile content open to re-shaping owned by the ethnicity in South East Europe. As such, other cases and circumstances could be quoted, in which the *milet* itself has become an ethnonym. For instance, Muslim Roma (*xoraxane cigani*) of Veliko Tŕrnovo of Bulgaria identified themselves by this term as a separate ethnic group in the census carried out by the end of 19th century. At that time, the *milet* denominated the population of Islamic religion (faith), the sole enjoying full civil rights prior to the year of 1880, during Ottoman administration. The word is still used by this population (Kolev and Krumova, 2005).

Lack of institutions, practices and reflections pertaining to the state nation, in a modern, Western meaning, does not feature in South East Europe countries only the groups with hidden identities or national minorities. On one hand, the core player of modernization in such countries was the *state*, but a weak or „captured” state (Meurs and Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010). This caused the colonization of political institutions and power concentrated in the capital of the country by networks representing groups of interests or by non-homogenous elites, either regional or different in terms of age and political competences. No less important was the influence of power balance at the international level. In many cases, decisions, strictly related to domestic policy, have been determined by pressure or interference of some “great powers”. Thus, the modernization program was transformed into a “formally modern frontside” (Jowitt, 1978). Decoupling of modernizing policies from “real country” relieved at the basis level of some societies consisting of “citizens-peasants” negotiation and persistence of some identities grounded on traditional solidarities. Considering this meaning, it could be stated that the whole mass of “common people” was “disempowered” in favor of the political power of the capital city.

On the other hand, an essential difference between the modernization complying with national pattern of Western countries and that of belated modernization of Eastern countries consisted in the meaning and functions of nation concept. While the nation has been connected in Western countries with “individual society, and state”, in Eastern Europe, including the South East Europe, nation had a cultural, ethnical content, being significant and re-elaborated, based on

a cultural local canon against the political and thinking influence of the Western side (Rizescu, 2000).

In a recent view of some scholars, the radicalization of nationalist discourse led to the emergence of some “national metaphysics” in countries such as Romania within inter-wars period, whilst in Bulgaria, its neighbor, within the same period of time, such discourse was shaped as a “magic realism” (Trencsényi, 2007). Public discourse agglutinated around themes of political modernization and especially on “national building-up” did not pursue the difference which featured West European modernization, i. e. among norms and state of facts, but was multiplied in two ranges at least: an own political language inspired by the Western political thinking and an “interpretative language” arising also from Western intellectual traditions, but amalgamated with forms of local culture. Function of the latter was quite steady throughout the history of modernization, offering an alternative, seemingly local, of the dominant modernizing program and building up by its significances the emotional content of the nation (Rizescu, 2000: 27).

At least part of the papers approaching the topics of political modernization of South East Europe countries, of the emergence of “the peasant-citizen”, and that of “national ontology”, have as non-stated premises the scattering of a political culture attached to such political and mental processes at the levels of traditional societies, briefly, amongst the common people. However, these premises do not take into account the rural resistance of the type that the traditional societies of South East Europe have made recourse, irrespective of the modernizing discourse was Westernized or, on the contrary, consisted of an “interpretative language”, in the above mentioned sense. Representation of rural societies, as an altogether entity, as “*People*” is not at all related to the state of fact. Indeed, rural resistance existed, and it was a powerful one, as I shall try to suggest in the final section of this paper, but they cannot be identified through nationalist radical speeches and anti-modernizing political utopias. Hidden identities are framed into these categories of rural resistance, their preservation and persistence until the post-communist time being a proof that the nationalist radical discourses were not scattered within the entire “peasant-citizens” society.

National, anti-modernization and also radical discourse has rejected even the concept of “national minority”, a concept launched within the inter-war period and assimilated by some states of South East Europe. However, it has been argued that the nationalist discourse of countries of South East Europe is inspired by the Western political thinking, a fact which might motivate its inclusion in the much more wide modernizing discourse. For instance, intellectuals

like Emil Cioran in Romania, and Yanko Yanev in Bulgaria have questioned the core national myths and reworked (re-wrote) them echoing the concepts and traditions of western philosophers (Hitchins, 2005). This theme is a complex one and I do not intend to approach it in this paper. However, what I want to stress is the core triggering element because of which this discourse has rejected the national minority concept. The identification of such triggering element allows disentangling of the theoretical premises by which the concept of hidden minority / identity seems to be a viable alternative given that of national minority, at least in cases of societies of South East European countries.

In a certain meaning, the concept of nation grounded on a homogenous and uniform culture was scattered in South East European countries within the interwar years. Its agent was a part of intellectual elite, enjoying a certain education and working in urban areas. The separation urban-rural comes first, no matter that the “urbanity” is rejected or accepted. What actually makes the difference is the “developmental” and schematic perspective by which the anti-modernizing, nationalist discourse validates its “urban” superiority upon the “rurals” (Creed and Ching, 1997: 5). It is true that, considering the rural society (the peasantry) perspective, aiming the “ideal” of urban life, the cleavage rustic-urban is also a sophisticated one. Rustics aim to the urban life, but once arrived here, they are disappointed by the peasants-city dweller mixture, of “cities populated with peasants” (*ibidem*, 17-19), cities subject to „(r)urbanization” (Roth, 1997). However, the assumption „rustic marginality” leads to “their empowerment”, not through an anti-modernized and radical speech, but by the persistence of “resistances” (Creed and Ching, 1997).

The triggering element of nationalist radical discourse, expressed in a type of an aforesaid interpretative language, is not therefore given by the knowledge of factual status of the native society, preponderantly rural. Contrarily, as Kenneth Jowitt quoted above has noted, the separation of the speech on modernization from the state of facts and empirical data on respective societies come exactly from the pattern of “frontside modernization” carried out in such countries (Chirot, 1989).

Recent analyses of the nationalisms of South East Europe, achieved by historians, in comparison with nationalisms in states emerged during post-colonial period, argue that the coming out of Balkan nationalisms is due to a specific way of conceiving history and modernization. Western pattern imposes a specific modernity type, as well a straight and progressive temporality, in relation to which countries of the waves subsequent to modernization, including South East Europe ones, are inevitably “backward” (Todorova, 2005). It is about to overcome the gap, circumstances and frustrations aggregated during modernization of such

countries in comparison with the Western European areas. Irrespective of such a method could be implemented either by de-construction of some pictures, such as that of “Balkans”, or by refining the analysis perspectives, the key issue remains the same.

I do not insist on such topics, although extremely interesting and theoretically productive. I just observe – in the context of the topic of this paper – that the inclusion of the nationalisms of post-colonial time in analyzing the cases of South East Europe reshapes the idea of nation as well as the corroborated concepts, such as identity, minority, and ethnicity. Michael Herzfeld performs a similar approach, but considering an anthropologist’s point of view. I put an end to this section by quoting his arguments on the idea of nation and national minority.

The insertion of the national pattern within the modern history of the South East European countries was rather triggered by the comparison with the Western countries than by the adequacy to the status of some rural, “rustic” societies. The political power, in its institutionalized meaning, has existed in such rural societies, but somehow externally, always to the borderlines, no matter how significant such borders were in terms of geography, for instance, the Danube River or the Aegean Sea, if we refer to the Ottoman Empire, or rather mentally represented territorial limits of a town, village, borough or city. The nation pattern, even in its tough version of the cultural nation, did not also exceed such limits. As suggestively says Michael Herzfeld in the case of Greece, nationalism is a “politics of mereness” (Herzfeld, 1997: 94).

Considering this context, the national pattern in South East Europe has come to deny the interests of minority groups: “nationalism, especially in its hegemonic forms that deny recognition to minority interests, often reproduces still larger power structures... This is especially applicable to the nationalisms of those very countries whose political marginality makes the defense of a particular cultural reading especially crucial for the country’s survival” (*ibidem*, 92). On the other hand, Herzfeld stresses that the essentialization of national pattern, a much easier fact to be detected, has a correspondent in the essentialization of marginal groups, among them the national minorities (*ibidem*, 166-167). Or, the principle of tolerance imposed by the reification of national minorities has consequences comparable with the nationalism: “the logic of tolerance, which comes under such names as ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘cultural diversity’ may heighten the sense of otherness and arrogate the egalitarian prerequisites of democracy to the majority group” (*ibidem*, 83).

Thus, modernization programs brought the national pattern into a proteic cultural environment, sometimes chameleonic, in any way, hard to be ranked via cognitive taxonomies imported in the same time with the idea of nation in the South East Europe (*ibidem*, 61-68). Even

failing to cover the entire mass of common people, scattering this cultural nation pattern through *dissemia*, using the term of Michael Herzfeld, leads to its “de-reification”. Re-shaping takes place following the resistance strategies which the common people build as a reply to the state pressure. They are founded on the idea of state that, among common people, consists of a series of icons (*ibidem*, 5). By means of the aforesaid, “ordinary people” negotiates the relations with local authorities, with bureaucracy, but also presents its “cultural intimacy” as a collective space where various identities “poetically” coexist. Michael Herzfeld performs a sophisticated analysis. He is inspired by the linguistic pragmatism theories (John Austin) and also by those of the literary text. I do not want to relate in detail, although the reviewing is directly connected to the topic of this paper. However, I underline the idea that the national pattern, as well those correlated thereof, such as ethnical identity, national minorities, and so on, have been subject to “poetization”, as Michael Herzfeld says, alluding to the Greek meaning of the verb *poiein*, to act (*ibidem*, 142).

In conclusion, hidden minorities consciously avoided to draw cultural limits, have empathized and understood and, many times, assimilated the differences of the other. *Their identity was rather a tacit resistance towards the modernization projects imposed by political elites of the cities*. Here, they have joint together with “majority” population, mainly peasantry / rural which also developed a series of tacit resistance strategies. The resistance motivation in the two cases was different, but the “enemy” was the same; hence, the apparent “invisibility” of hidden identities.

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