

Fabio Mattioli

Rozita Dimova. *Ethno-Baroque: Materiality, Aesthetics and Conflict in Modern-Day Macedonia*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-78238-040-5.

Fabio Mattioli. Address for correspondence: Department of Anthropology, City University of New York, The Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA. fmattioli@gc.cuny.edu.

Every time I read a new book, I ask myself: what kind of food item would it be? Since the very first chapter, I had no doubts about Rozita Dimova's *Ethno-Baroque: Materiality, Aesthetics and Conflict in Modern-Day Macedonia*. I was dealing with an onion.

In my culinary opinion, onions are the basis for pretty much everything: their piercing yet sweet taste makes them the fundamental ingredient you can build and rely upon. The same is true for Dimova's book. It is a fundamental work for anybody who is interested in the study of Macedonia and ex-Yugoslav societies in general, but it appeals also to scholars of ethnicity and space in general.

Clearly written, with abundance of historical and ethnographic details, the book utilizes an anthropological perspective to discuss the complicate historical construction of ethnicity. Dimova argues that ethnic identities have to be understood in the light of past and present political economic factors. Discussing the conflicts, misunderstandings, and tensions between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians in Kumanovo, the second largest city of the Republic of Macedonia, Dimova shows that unexpected domains of social life, like consumption, have a central role to play in shaping identity.

Her choice to bring consumption to the fore builds upon and complements nicely other classical works on ethnicity in the Balkans (see, e.g., Bringa 1995; Karakaidou 1997; Brown 2003; Neofotistos 2012). Her propensity to spatial analysis is also particularly timely and welcome, as more and more scholars of the region are analyzing critically urbanities (see Buchli 1999; Collier 2011; Hirt 2012; Fehervary 2013).

The book is organized in five chapters. The first chapter analyzes how the socialist state of Yugoslavia framed the relations between Albanians and Macedonians. The chapter highlights the importance of migration during socialism, showing that systematically discriminated-against Albanians found in migration a viable outlet for class and status enhancement.

Albanians' migration to western Europe had profound effects on the Macedonian society after 1991: when socialism collapsed and (neo)liberalism kicked in, Albanians found themselves able to draw upon international connections and wealth. Macedonians, on the other hand, experienced the transition mostly as a loss—of status, of possibilities to consume, of wealth, of mobility. Chapters 2 and 4 detail this opposite trajectory examining, respectively, the genealogy of social meanings embedded in the materiality of private furnishings and the history of an up-and-coming neighborhood of Kumanovo.

Chapters 3 and 5 show that migration, wealth, and loss did not only shape interethnic relations between groups, they also modified identities from within each ethnic entity. Albanian men for instance found their masculinity suspended between wanting to date “emancipated” women and the need of social and cultural reproduction of tradition. On the other hand, Macedonian (men’s) political sensibilities shifted towards victimhood, constituting a fertile ground for nationalist projects such as the Skopje 2014 plan—which redefined completely Macedonianness, rebuilding the center of the city as a “European” capital fraught with neo-classical/baroque buildings.

Dimova’s approach introduces new elements to the seemingly endless concern with ethnicity that characterizes the scholarship about Macedonia (and ex-Yugoslavia in general). The book productively shifts the debate towards issues of class formation, materiality, and historical subjectivities. Dimova analyzes the rooted historical material changes that make “loss” a powerful affective motor for social relations and spins its implication for Albanians and Macedonians alike. This is a very elegant way to think ethnicity—from the ethnic boundaries outwards, as opposed to defining (or questioning) the social construction of ethnic groups.

Such a wealth of insights comes from a very eclectic theoretical framework that combines historical, psychoanalytical, ethnographic, and actor-network perspectives, providing a holistic picture of the political and ethnic situation in Macedonia. Materiality and aesthetics are crucial in this book, which contributes to the growing body of literature on urban and material socialities produced by Eastern Europeanists. Dimova’s eclecticism stands in tension with categories employed in the contemporary debates in anthropology: the book does not sit quietly in any single stream of anthropological literature, nor accepts being defined by a single body of thought.

This is in part a consequence of the very structure of the book. Like onions, each chapter constitutes a discreet and independent layer. The focus, brevity, and boundedness of the chapters make the book ideal for teaching, as one can “peel off” each chapter and use it independently—a quality that makes it, however, difficult to maintain focus on the book’s overall direction as one reads.

But this onion-ness corresponds also to a deeper, more elusive quality of the book. Juxtaposing different theoretical approaches, Dimova inscribes in the very structure of the book her theoretical paradigm. The anthropology that the author proposes is one of peeling: as chapters “peel” by, the reader discovers deeper and nested material and historical structures that underlie space and identity.

Dimova’s choice to avoid building a grand theoretical system around her data might be seen by some as a nod to poststructuralist anthropology, of the sort proposed by authors such as Renato Rosaldo or Anna Tsing. But this choice let her data shine with unmediated power, generously offering them for further analysis. Just like onions, her book makes a solid, dependable, and powerful base that the attentive reader can mine for ethnographic, historical, and theoretical insights.

REFERENCES

- Bringa, Tone. 1995. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, Keith. 2003. *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Buchli, Victor. 1999. *An Archaeology of Socialism*. Oxford: Berg.
- Collier, Stephen J. 2011. *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fehervary, Krisztina. 2013. *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hirt, Sonia A. 2012. *Iron Curtains: Gates, Suburbs and Privatization of Space in the Post-Socialist City*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Karakasidou, Anastasia N. 1997. *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood: Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia, 1870–1990*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Neofotistos, Vasiliki P. 2012. *The Risk of War: Everyday Sociality in the Republic of Macedonia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.