Pathways of anthropology in South Eastern Europe: an ethnographic approach of the discipline and its disciples in Bulgaria and Greece

Introduction

Our presentation deals with the history of the discipline of anthropology in two South Eastern European countries, Bulgaria and Greece. I won’t put up the question whether we should consider Greece as belonging to the East or to the West. What initially seemed to me more intriguing is the fact that the last few years, is observed an increasing interest by both “eastern” and “western” scholars about the various aspects of the practice of “anthropology” in and of Eastern Europe during socialism (such as the works edited by C. Hann 1989, P. Skalnik 2002, C. Hann, Mihaly Sarkany & P. Skalnik 2005 or V. Mihailescu, I. Iliev & S. Naumovic 2008). Nevertheless, most of these recent studies explore this question comparing almost exclusively ex-socialist epistemological paradigms.

At the same time, in Greece, anthropological literature (Madianou 1993 & 2002, Papataxiarhis 2003 & 2007, Toundassaki 2003) has treated issues related to the history of the discipline and its relations to other neighboring sciences, especially to folklore, without any comparative perspective to other close or distant cases. More generally, in both Greece and Bulgaria, the development of social sciences, and of social anthropology in particular, has been studied until very recently only at a national level.

My argument is that a comparison between the Greek and the Bulgarian case could assist in overcoming the Cold War dichotomies and give a new perspective to the understanding of the elaboration of the discipline in various places in the world. Transforming the scope of the inquiry into comparisons between different epistemological traditions developed in SEE could be an
interesting project, as it shows that what seems to be “particular” for each national scientific tradition are often similar phenomena, due to common social and historical frameworks.

As an introductory remark it could be noticed that in both Bulgaria and Greece, a discipline named “social and/or cultural Anthropology”, as the study of “otherness”, following the ways the discipline is exercised in different western European countries or the States, has been institutionalised very recently, only in the late 1980s and since the 1990s. Until then other academic and research practices (such as folklore, ethnology or ethnography), focused in the study of the (national) self, had prevailed.

These tendencies could be better understood if we consider the historical conditions under which these local scientific traditions were born in order to serve different societal purposes than those of their contemporary British or American anthropology. My hypothesis is that whilst anthropology has been based on the principle that the knowledge of the “self” comes through that of the “other” and is thus focused on the concepts of “otherness”, “difference” and “distance”, local sciences, until recently, have been interested in the construction of the (national) identity, formed in opposition to the neighbour or distant European “other”. Today these conceptual borders are all challenged leading to new questions for the anthropology of the 21st century, where concepts such as “diversity”, to which is dedicated this year conference, may represent a good alternative. Of course the time of a presentation is limited, so I will give an outline of what can be a much more detailed analysis of these questions, based on a comparative historical overview.

In search for the commonalities and differences between Greece and Bulgaria, I have investigated the development of empirical social science and theory during the last century throughout a double methodological perspective: a) an ethnographic study of academic and research institutions and texts, and b) an oral history dealing with the accounts of the social actors that played an active role to the organization of the discipline in these two countries.
Pathways of Anthropology: a comparative historical overview

End of the 19th – first half of the 20th century:

So let’s take things from the beginning: Since the end of the 19th century, in both Bulgaria and Greece, are academically established the sciences of the Laographia (study of the laos, the people), in Greece and of the Narodopis or Narodouka (study of the nation) in Bulgaria. In the latter in 1889 the founding father of the discipline Ivan Shishmanov launches the new discipline, “which encompasses ethnography and folklore and investigates the national traditions in a comparative Balkan and Slavic perspective” (V. Mihaiilescu, I. Iliev & S. Naumovic 2008: 3).

The newly established Narodouka is a science that gives emphasis to language. Until the 1960s the teaching of ethnography and folklore is offered primarily at the Department of Philology, later Department of Slavic Languages and Ethnography at the Faculty of Philology. Among the local scholars, some were more fieldwork-oriented, such as Dimitar Marinov and were named “ethnographers”, whilst others, such as Mikhail Arnaudov, have been “armchair scholars”, occupying academic positions and were considered “folklorists” (Valchinova 2004: 3). At this moment the borders between ethnography and folklore were not very clear, the distinction between them following grosso modo the spiritual-material culture split (V. Mihaiilescu, I. Iliev & S. Naumovic 2008: 275).

In Greece the term Laographia is used for the first time by the founding father of the discipline Nikolaos Politis at about the same years in 1884. Combining the English terms “folklore” and “ethnography”, Politis privileges an ancient Greek term “laographia”, giving thus emphasis to the relation between ancient Greece and the “folk culture” of its times. Laographia is taught at the University of Athens since 1890 and a Department of Folklore is established at the University of Thessaloniki in 1926 (Madianou 1993: 164). Greek laographoi are influenced by the evolutionist theories of their time, such as Frazer’s works and especially Tylor’s theory on cultural survivals, or the diffusionist theory. However, their interest is limited only to material from
Greece and they did not search to give any comparative perspective to their work. They also rarely had any fieldwork practice, this being reserved to local intellectuals, especially teachers or even pupils of every region. Finally, they often permitted themselves to intervene and transform the texts collected.

In both courtiers this interest for national traditions is shaped under the influence of the French Enlightenment as well as the German Romanticism. Bulgarian scholars have been also under important Russian intellectual influences (Valchinova, 2004, Iliev, 2008). A main difference remains, though, in the object of study: in Bulgaria the focus is put upon the rural population and its culture, whilst in the Greek side the “folk” (again equivalent to rural) culture is always studied in its relationship and as a continuation of the ancient Greek civilization and goes hand in hand with the development of archeology, philology and history.

The common feature is that, in contrast to the anthropology developed at the same period in Britain, France or the States, as a “cosmopolitan” science (to use C. Hann’s term, 2003) and a colonial empire-building discipline, in search of the European “other”, local scientific paradigms have a strong national orientation, much more focused on the study of the self. As V. Mihailescu, I. Iliev & S. Naumovic note “Nation [becomes] thus the longue durée political context and epistemological frame of reference of all these «national ethnologies»” (2008, 1). These tendencies are not surprising if we consider the geopolitical situation in SEE during the last one and a half century. As M. Herzfeld has shown for the Greek case, these “national” disciplines were designated to contribute to the construction of national identities in the young Balkan states, which were recently created after the dissolution of regional empires (Ottoman, Russian, Habsburg), still had many territories disputed and disposed of minorities in most of their neighboring countries. This construction was not only an internal process but also an external issue related to the search for recognition and support from the European and Russian protectors that had contributed to the creation and further existence of these nation-states.
Consequently it is not surprising that some of the most important Bulgarian intellectuals of the “National Revival” like Petko Slaveikov or Georgi Rakovski, were also passionate collectors of ethnographic material. Also that ethnocentric folklore and positivistic history are established in the academia since the very creation of the Greek and Bulgarian state respectively. These processes go hand in hand with the absence of social sciences from the academia during the same period. The latter are supposed to exercise a critical view and to be devoted to deconstruct and debunk social and cultural myths. As D. Madianou remarks for Greece, “Whatever discipline did not openly support the historic myths through which the national identity has being constructed was considered suspect and therefore branded as unnecessary” (1993: 164).

At the same time, some outstanding personalities outside the academia develop fieldwork practices, which were related to the same efforts of modernization of the state and homogenization of the nation: the most prominent example in Greece is the lawyer K. Karavidas, who as employee in different important state offices (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Greek Agricultural Bank) has conducted systematic demographic and social research in Greek Macedonia. There he focused on the organization of the extended family, the so-called zadruga, in search of ways to hellenize the slavomacedonian populations of the region.

Finally, Balkan societies have attracted very few western scholars during this period: only in the interwar years Bulgaria is visited by the American sociologist, trained to anthropology, Irwin Sanders who makes his research in a village near Sofia, Dragalevtsi. Sanders had a modernization perspective in his mind and his study, following a “community studies” framework, is an analysis of how a “traditional” Bulgarian village copes with its passage to modernity. There has not been any equivalent visitor to Greece before the Second World War. This lack of interest for SEE had to do with the priorities anthropologists attributed themselves at that moment in search for more distant and exotic “others”. As J. Halpern & D. Kideckel (1983) note, in contrast to the non-European societies, based on oral tradition and lacking
written sources, the very fact that existed in Eastern Europe a long-standing local scientific production, very different from the western one, meant that the Balkans were considered a less unknown and unexplored field and to a certain extent made anthropologists feel uncomfortable. This lack of communication between local and foreign scholars will continue, and in some cases it becomes even more accentuated, during the period after the Second World War.

**After the 2nd WW:**

At that time, under the doctrine of the Cold War, major changes occur in the practice of the discipline in both sides of the border. In this very moment that anthropology, in the framework of de-colonization is starting to “return back home” and anthropologists become more and more interested in the study of European and north American cultures, beginning with the so-called “Mediterranean” societies of Southern Europe, socialist Europe follows a different historical, political and academic path, getting isolated from the western anthropological paradigm and developing a soviet-marxist influenced ethnography.

Bulgaria makes no exception to the rule: its academia comes under the influence of the soviet epistemological principals and some important changes occur: First, although most of the pre-socialist scholars remained in their positions, a centralized state administration and an ideological evaluation of academic activities is elaborated. Anthropology / ethnology is considered a “bourgeois discipline” and as such is banned in favor of ethnography. Still, M. Benovska (2008) remarks the paradox that during socialism social sciences and humanities have been under sever ideological control, but at the same time proliferated with their academic establishment in the Academy of Sciences and diverse departments or chairs in the University, with the publication of numerous periodicals or the creation of (national and local) museums.

There is also an important shift in the orientation of the discipline: under the model of the Soviet *etnographia*, Bulgarian ethnography is not any more considered a philological but a historical subject. As a “complementary
historical discipline” (Valchinova 2004), where the present is considered to have historical dimensions and be always related to the past, ethnography is supposed to concentrate to the study of the cultural history of the country.

And despite the internationalism promoted by the communist ideology and an emphasis to modernization adopted by the socialist regimes, the purpose of nation-building remains the main guideline for disciplines such as ethnography and folklore. Local ethnographers considered traditions as the relics of the nation’s past, which had to be carefully collected and preserved and developed a “salvatory” attitude towards the “traditional” culture menaced to disappear under the rapid changes of their time. As soviet ethnography did not follow the Malinowskian “revolution”, which broke up with evolutionist schemes and gave emphasis to the synchronic analysis, evolutionary patterns in search for the ethnogenesis and the origins (of an object, practice, ritual) (Valchinova 2004:4) remained the main subject of investigation for Bulgarian scholars, neglecting concerns with the structure or the functions of a culture. Nor did fieldwork practices follow the Malinowskian example of long-sanding individual participant observation of a distant culture. Short-term collective fieldtrips were organized and rarely scholars or students had the opportunity to make a research outside their national borders.

The above-mentioned changes are expressed in the establishment in 1949 of the Institute of Ethnography with Museum, which begins to publish its review, the Annual Collection of the Institute of Ethnography with Museum. The teaching of ethnography is gradually shifted from Faculty of Slavic Philology to the Faculty of History. In 1974 a split takes place in the BAS and an Institute for Folklore is created and starts publishing its own review [Bulgarski Folklore (Bulgarian Folklore)]. After the separation a constant competition exists between the two Institutes concerning their “division of labour”, which as was the case in the pre-socialist period is not always clear and is concentrated to the spiritual-material culture divide.

In the case of Greece, due also to the Cold War divisions, anthropology comes under the heavy influence of the Anglo-Saxon, and to a lesser extent of
the French ethnological paradigm. The most important innovation is that after the Second WW Greek society becomes the object of systematic anthropological investigation, starting in the mid-1950s with the famous monographs of J. Campbell for the Sarakatsani, a pastoral-nomadic people in the Zagori region and of Ernestin Friedl for the village Vassiliki in central Greece. Following the model of the monographs produced about Africa and under the influence of the functional-structuralist paradigm, emphasis is given to the study of isolated village communities and more precisely to kinship, political relations and cultural patterns such as “Honor and Shame” that exoticize Greece which becomes one of the eminent paradigms of the Mediterranean anthropology.

At the same time, western anthropologists visiting Greece are not very open to contacts or to the work of local scholars. Additionally, the hegemony of Folklore in the Greek academia continues in numerous Departments of Philology, Philosophy and History, whilst anthropological courses are excluded and anthropological works are neglected by Greek Folklorists. The only exception to the rule is the Center for Social Research of Athens founded in 1959 by the UNESCO under the direction of John Peristiany, which played the role of an intermediary: there was formed a first generation of Greeks with critical training in social sciences and at the same time the Center hosted the foreign scholars in Greece. Inside this research institution developed a stimulating intellectual environment where anthropologists could come across rural sociologists and (mainly French) human-geographers who all came to study Greek society in the aftermath of the War. But the Center was suddenly closed by the military junta in the late 60’s, whilst an important number of Greek scholars flew in Europe for political reasons.

Finally, in contrast to Greece, but also to other socialist Balkan countries such as Romania or Yugoslavia, few western anthropologists arrive to conduct fieldwork in Bulgaria (the Americans Carol Silverman, Eleanor Smollett and Gerald Creed and the of Bulgarian origin Australian studying in the UK Deema Kaneff). Their studies concern essentially village communities in the late years
of communism (mid 1980s), dealing with the consequences of the changes introduced by the communist regime in the rural sector. But generally speaking, socialist Bulgaria remained relatively closed and marginal for (western) anthropologists and ethnographies of Bulgaria had a limited impact on both the anthropological literature and the local scientific debates.

1990 and Beyond:

This situation changes rapidly after the fall of socialist regimes in the early 1990s, as ex-socialist societies have massively attracted the interest of western anthropologists. At the same time, there are also important institutional reorganizations in these countries. Moreover, all these changes are taking place in an era when scientific thought in general, and anthropology more specifically, face profound criticism (through post-modernism, post-colonial studies, cultural critique, feminist theories, etc) and search ways on how to redefine both their methods and theories.

In Bulgaria new departments of Anthropology are created in public and newly founded private Universities, whilst in the Faculty of History in Sofia a specialization in Ethnology has been created, replacing the old courses in Ethnography. Additionally, the courses of Folklore in most philology departments were renamed to Cultural Anthropology. In the BAS similar changes are noticed: the Institute of Ethnography has been renamed to Institute of Ethnology and its review Bulgarian Ethnology, whilst the Institute of Folklore periodical's title was not changed, but the subtitle “BF: Journal for Folklore, Ethnological and Anthropological Research” was added.

As expected, many cleavages have occurred around the newly established discipline, which is in search of a distinct identity and of a place inside a highly competitive academic environment, which lacks of funds and is under total reorganization. The old adversities between ethnologists and folklorists continue, taking various forms: first with the continuation of the competition between the two Institutes, but also with the shift of many folklorists to the new private University (NBU), where a Department of Social
and Cultural Anthropology exists, and their reconversion to American style cultural anthropologists. Another cleavage emerged among all the latter and scholars who did not have any training in Anthropology before 1989, but came from literary or cultural studies (but also philosophers, historians or sociologists), who master well English and now declare themselves anthropologists. Finally new scholars trained in American or western European universities arrive and also search their place in the new professional arena.

Many labels have changed and they are followed by new ways of doing fieldwork, new themes of investigation, new readings. Today there are much more opportunities for research trips and training outside Bulgaria, whilst more people learn English instead of Russian. Nevertheless, there still exist many continuities with the old concepts and practices, especially among the older generations of academics whose careers are at the threshold of the transition. And, what is more important, the majority of actual studies are still conducted in Bulgaria and rarely concern other cultures.

On the other side of the border, if Greek society has been the object of ethnographic research since the aftermath of the Second World War, “Greek anthropology” is a quite young discipline: it is only in the late 1980s and early 1990s that the first departments of Anthropology were created (in the island of Mytilini and then in Athens, at Panteio, a University of Social and Political Sciences). These changes are part of a general shift towards social sciences. After the fall of the junta in 1974 and the coming to power of the socialist party same years later, a new law for the Universities is voted (in 1982) introducing social sciences to many newly created universities, especially those located on the national borders (Crete, Aegean, Thrace).

Until then the Greeks that wanted to study Anthropology were obliged to go to the States or in Western European Universities and they usually returned back to Greece in order to do their fieldwork there. This trajectory was considered at that time as pioneering, following the latest theoretical and methodological trends where “indigenous Anthropology” or “anthropology at home” were at the stake. And usually these first scholars, after finishing their
studies came back to Greece where they staffed the first departments, which were just to be founded.

The major issue that emerged for the first Greek anthropologist was the fact that as Greece never possessed colonies it was difficult to identify an anthropological object of study outside the national boundaries or find any funding for fieldwork research outside Greece. So Greek scholars were obliged to look inward, to establish their ‘colonies’ within, to use D. Madianou’s words (1993: 165-166), and remained close to the objectives of the other local disciplines: the search of their own cultural identity. The danger of such a methodological attitude was the potential reproduction of a certain hellenocentric introversion and the lack of cross cultural comparisons. The solution given was the attachment of Greek anthropology to the western anthropological theoretical literature which became its main frame of reference.

Also, nowadays a new generation of scholars has emerged, who have been the first students graduating from the anthropological departments in Greece and many started doing fieldwork in another country, near or more distant to their own. Others are interested in new topics such as migration in SEE, Greek urban cultures and a multitude of new topics related to the ongoing changes of Greek society. All these processes, combined with a theoretical turn towards reflexivity, the “experimental moment” of anthropology, the theories of practice, constructivism and so on represent the opening of a new era in Greek Anthropology and a shift from the interest of the self to that of the internal or external “other” as E. Papataxiarhitis (2006) notes. Today anthropology is taught in many different Departments in most of the Universities of the country and it seems to have a more and more cosmopolitan and extraverted orientation.

So in general, Greek Anthropology is expanding during the last 15 years, and I think this is the case for Anthropology in other Balkan countries too. The major danger presented nowadays is that in both countries anthropology's institutionalization as a new, modern and fashionable science is related to representations of “modernization”, “democratization” (M. Elchinova
and incorporation to the EU. The vindication of an anthropological identity risks thus to become a struggle for legitimation inside and outside the academia or a sterile imitation of foreign concepts and practices, without any further epistemological contribution.

Another, interrelated, issue raised is the relation between anthropology and the local scientific legacies. It is now a commonplace that anthropology has not any more the monopoly towards the study of “otherness”, whilst folklore is not any more dedicated to the construction of the historical self. In Greece as Nitsiakos remarks (2008), Laographia has since the 1970s broaden its fields of enquiry and it has obtained a more historical and social dimension, becoming an indigenous ethnographic science specialized in the study of Greek society and culture. Thus today the limits between folklore, ethnology, ethnography and anthropology are less clear than ever, especially when things come to the question of studying “from inside” a certain culture. Still the communication between them is very problematic, if not inexistent. It is worth noting that in B. folklorists seem more ready to reconvert to anthropologists, whilst ethnologists still defend the specificity of local epistemological traditions. On the contrary, in G. folklorists, although much informed in the theoretical trends in anthropology, continue to defend the autonomy and specificity of their discipline and resist its fusion to anthropology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we could notice that since the 19th century and until nowadays, social sciences and humanities in SEE have been attached to a double project: the participation to the modernization processes on the one hand and the contribution to the nation-building on the other. These two societal projects have been combined to a certain extend, although the latter seems to have been given until recently priority by all political regimes, orienting thus to a large extent the directions of the scientific work.

The long-standing existence of academic institutions and of a local scientific community implies the formation nowadays of a multi-vocal local
discourse. To my opinion, Greek and Bulgarian anthropologists should not only restrain themselves to readings coming from the western anthropological literature but also systematically turn towards the texts produced locally. These traditions should also be taught to students as part of the history of the discipline and be explained in their social and historical context. This could be beneficial not only for the better comprehension of our own societies but also for the production of an indigenous discourse that participates and enriches the anthropological theory and links local issues to broader international ones.