BALKANS OF COLOUR

THE CASE OF POMAKS

Francesco Trupia



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Speaking of Race in Bulgaria

Francesco Trupia

In Bulgaria the contemporary anti-Roma discourse and rampant Islamophobia have indicated how widespread racism is. It should be also pointed out that the country has regularly foreclosed the notion of race in order to assess such a phenomenon, thereby favoring the notion of ethnicity rather than race itself. The perpetuation of the myth of racelessness from the historiography and political landscape of Bulgaria and the Balkans in general, has diminished the shared connections between ethnic minority groups and other typically minoritised communities that are ascribed around their race. Elana Resnick argues that, in the Balkans, such a denial unravels a form of white supremacy and asserts the existence of racialized hierarchies. The entanglement of modern racism and power is not only appropriate to studying the chronological history of Europe but also paramount for rejecting the issue of racist politics as an unfortunate and unexpected identification with whiteness. Therefore, there is one question that deserves to be raised: does race, or do racial hierarchies, exist in Bulgaria?

In general, the tandem of race and racism can propel the same value-laden rationale behind which the research approach of Critical Race Studies (CRS) provides as a better lens of investigation worldwide. In particular, numerous intersecting and overlapping threads that pertain to the notion of race and phenomena of racialisation show multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion which have been similarly shaped by global white supremacy. The concrete tension between being unable to engage vs. being unwilling to examine forms of racism and anti-blackness is of great importance even in the Balkans where "ethnicity" matters the most.

Among others, the case of Pomaks provides a critical perspective for unraveling issues of internal racism and domestic coloniality in the contemporary history of Bulgaria. Within the country, according to Dušan Bjelić, race relations and internal (domestic) colonialism can be found in the race discourse against national minorities such as Turks and Muslim Pomaks. Subjected to racial-type laws and policies of assimilation, which almost led to cultural genocide, Pomak identity was hotly debated. Members of groups composed of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, the state-endorsed official historiography depicted them as most probable descendants of Bulgarian Christians who converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule. They retain the Bulgarian language as well as certain Orthodox practices, yet their self-identification with Islam has been historically strong.

After the Balkan Wars, Bulgaria and other Balkan states were quite young, somewhat lacking in national pride, and in desperate need of a dignified collective identity. As Myuhtar-May noted, the Slavic-speaking Pomaks were recast as "pure-blood" Bulgarians who spoke the "purest" Bulgarian language and preserved the "truest" Bulgarian traditions.

During the interwar period, the process of Nazi Germany's ethnic self-racialisation vis-à-vis Jewish ethnicity understood as an internal sub-race, did not differ much to the long-standing post-Ottoman process of Bulgaria's "ethnic self-racialisation" vis-à-vis Muslim nationals and ethnic Turks. While the latter were privileged by a former empire's minority status, Pomaks were instead subjected to forcible Christianisation and name-changing campaigns since the 1910s. In the 1940s, the Nazi-allied Bulgarian Monarchy passed the "Law for the Protection of the Nation" (Законът за защита на нацията), which resembled and recuperated some logics and interactions of the Nuremberg Race Law. Ironically, Slavic majoritarian populations were equalized to other colored races in the early 20th century, especially after the rapid production of racial hygiene policies and implementation of eugenic measures. These were about to counter 'qualitative' aspects of the implementation of Slavic and colored populations themselves along with their racial characteristics.

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of "internal racism" by referring to eugenics. Despite the takeover of Communist forces and anti-imperialist stances, Bulgaria's domestic colonisation unfolded violently within specific ethnic landscapes. This typical form of "internal (domestic) colonialism" was rethought by Foucault himself as a form of governmentality impinging on individuals in their most basic relations to themselves and others. Foucault argued that not only Nazism and Western ethnocentrism, but even socialism and Marxism were racist from the outset. During the same period of time, in Bulgaria, another wave of vigorous attempts was made to oblige Pomaks to abandon their Muslim and Arabic names and adopt Bulgarian ones. Paraphrasing Foucault here, Bulgarian socialism showed its racist component by taking up, developing, re-implanting, and modifying its basis or its modes of working. Race relations between Bulgarians and Muslim Pomaks were presented as existing inside the "same type", where the political conversion of ethnicity into race was central to account the history of Bulgaria. Race of Pomaks, in this sense, was an operative category of identity-remaking over their specific ethnic space, namely, the Rhodope region. Hence, Pomaks themselves were simply considered pure-blooded Bulgarians who had just been forced to convert to Islam during the Ottoman Empire.

This form of auto-referential racism came into shape through the so-called 'Rebirth Process' – namely, an often inconsistent and contradictory policies of nativisation that the Communist Bulgaria Party orchestrated and implemented on the ground against ethnic and religious minorities. The rhetoric was that of salvation and progress, more precisely of "cultural uplifting" (e.g. културно издигане), which echoed a particular tradition of humanist practices with a long colonial career. As Gerhard Meinsenbeg would have argued, the words 'culture' and 'race' happened to be interchangeable. Likewise, Angela Saini wrote that particular cultural features had been historically chosen arbitrarily, through a superficial selection of external characters. Culture mattered only because it had a political meaning attached to it. When the word "race" had been prudently replaced by 'population', racial differences came to replace the notion of 'human variation'.

Moreover, socialism's auto-referential racism showed how the traditional relationship between race discourse and nationalism had the tendency to reverse itself. Affirming the superior value of the majoritarian cultural self (us) and thereby making room for the logic of isolation and exclusion of the 'abnormal', Communist Bulgaria's nationalist turn of the 1970s was increasingly becoming, or perhaps had already become, a function of racism. After all, the power of nationalism has historically been to tell different peoples to descend from greatness, that they have been genetically endowed with something special, something passed down to them over generations. Both mechanisms of dissimilation and assimilation against Pomak identity and history were possible discourse strategies of the internal racism discourse. Expanded into an internal war that defends the core society against the threats born in its own body, the 'Rebirth Campaign" mulled over Pomak identity, history, and ontologies. The central scope was to engine a policy of nativisation of all mediating cultural devices among different communities in order to reinforce the 'unity' of the nation – namely, of the 'Edinstvo'. Literally "oneness", the Edinstvo was introduced as a performative societal model during socialism; its philosophy dragooned everyone into a sort of 'epistemic self-colonisation' implemented through institutionalizing a new normative history. Accordingly, Pomaks and other minorities would have taken an absolute distance from their own past, their legacies and ontologies. Becoming the ideological watchword of a society without divisions, the Edinstvo was an operative category of "socialist unity" blatantly depicted as a step further to a full-fledged classless society. Under the parapet of such a State-run ideology, the purpose of the Edinstvo was that of regrouping and reanimating Bulgarian-ness as a locus of state sovereignty. In this way, Communist Bulgaria showed its nationalism's internal supplement, as Balibar would refer to it. It was not merely exacerbated xenophobia but, in a sense, the very opposite: the rejection of the Bulgarian "complementary enemy", namely, the Muslim identity of Pomaks and their Turcophilia.

Tellingly, the term "complementary enemy" was firstly coined by Germaine Tillion during the war in Algeria against the French colonisation. Another similar paradigm - namely, 'judicial humanity' - almost equalises the colonised experiences of Pomaks to that of Egyptians under the British domination. In fact, judicial humanity could serve to unravel some mechanisms of Bulgaria's judicial internalisation of colonialism and coloniality. The British repression of "alternative sovereignties" that Egyptians had aspired to, yet repressed through a "technique of purification", enabled the British administration to turn law's ideals of humanity into violent weapons of control. Similarly, Communist authorities propagated their purpose of re-humanising non-Bulgarian subjectivities and healing the wounds of Turkification. From a (post-)colonial perspective, here Franz Fanon's argumentation could also provide yet another eye-opening lens of explanation of the paradigm of coloniality and race in Bulgaria. The different waves of the Rebirth Campaign, some of which were opposed particularly violently by Pomak communities between the 1960s and the 1970s, had the aim of re-humanising Pomak Muslims, and not dehumanising them. Pomaks themselves were not simply excluded and violently targeted; on the contrary, the act of changing their Muslim and Turkic-sounding names as well as forcing them to renounce their traditional attire, had the goal to elevate them from their status of backwardness and fully uplifted them to the status of Bulgarians. They were supposed, in other words, to return to their Bulgarian ancestry and be liberated from the inhuman condition prescribed by some former rulers. It followed that birth control, prohibition of abortion, selective breeding, and sterilization, were all some of the eugenicists' technologies for racially enhancing the ruling ethnic majority. If compared with Samera Esmeir's understanding of judicial humanity, Communist Bulgaria's purified ideal of humanity was only aimed at safeguarding the central authority of power and the danger of imperilling the sovereignty of the Bulgarian statehood.

All of these cannot gloss over the discourse over domestic colonisation which, since the end of the 19th century, was not only associated not only a biological race thinking, but also embedded in the colonial roots of ethnic nationalism. After the Ottoman Empire, in fact, Bulgarian institutions had to forge a new nation out of the crumbled structures of the old colonial regime and transcend them. The new "foreign nationals" were soon considered the outsiders to the new state; they were not outside the border of the state itself, but rather present and belonging to it.

To conclude, even if the 'word' race was not being used, the idea of race and race thinking was there, deep within the bedrock. Within it, Western Europe's colonialism penetrated Bulgaria as well as the Balkans and Eastern Europe in the same sequential order, informing each other via the boomerang effect of colonial practices.

WHO IS WHO?

TO KNOW MORE

***Michel Foucault* is one of the most celebrated French philosophers and activists who challenged people's assumptions about medicine, prison, psychiatry, government and sexuality. All his writings continue to have a huge influence on politics and its related issues of personal freedom and activism.**

***Franz Fanon* was one of the most outspoken African intellectuals and Marxists. His work has largely influenced the post-colonial studies, where he was also deeply concerned with the psychopathology of colonization and the cultural consequences of decolonization.**

***Germaine Tillion* was a French ethnologist and a member of the French resistance during the Nazi occupation of France. Tillion is still a renowned scholar for her studies in Algeria during the 1950s, especially during the anti-colonial struggle of Algerians. She was among the first to denounce the use of torture by French colonial forces.**

Étienne Balibar **is a French philosopher and the most celebrated student of Louis Althusser. In his career, he has been working on the theoretical nexus of historical materialism and critical theory.**

Dušan Bjelić **is professor and Chair at the University of Southern Maine, US. His areas of interest are ethnomethodology and critical studies of psychoanalysis and psychiatry.**

Elana Resnick **is Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara (US). Her research interests cover environmental politics, phenomena of racialization, socialist and postsocialist period in European Union and Bulgaria.**

Angela Saini **is a British journalist, writer and radio presenter. Among her publications, *Superior. The Return of Race Science* (2019), and *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong and the New Research that is Rewriting the Story* (2018) have received international recognition and attention from both civil society actors and academia.**

use Wikipedia or other research platforms to look people up: ResearchGate, Academia

QUESTIONS AND FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Does Foucalt's analysis of racism fail to adequately take into the account the role of European colonialism in the Balkans? After reading the text, **do you think that racism and colonialism are always two faces of the same coin?**

2. Bulgaria has never had a history of colonisation, even though the text above argues that a different form of colonisation shifted gears domestically after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. **What's your take on it?**

3. "In all areas of social life in Bulgaria, ethnic and religious minority groups remain mostly separated and disturbingly unequal to the core society". After reading and reflecting on the text above, **do you agree with this statement, why or why not?**



FUTHER READING

Neuberger, Mary (2004) *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Bulgaria*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

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Angela Saini (2019) *Superior. The Return of Race Science*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Samera Esmeir (2012) *Judicial Humanity. A Colonial History,* Redwood City: Stanford University Press.