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Negotiating Culture

Moving, Mixing and Memory in
Contemporary Europe

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Living Together or Living Side by Side? Interethnic Coexistence in Multiethnic Societies

KLAUS ROTH

The six countries that founded the European Union five decades ago were ethnically homogeneous nations, and the same was true for the nine countries which joined the EU until 1995;¹ and with the exception of Orthodox Greece, all 15 member countries are predominantly Catholic or Protestant. If the EU has nevertheless become a union marked by increasing ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, this has been due not to its enlargement but to the influx of millions of immigrants, most of them from outside Europe.

In May 2004, the EU grew to become a union of 25 countries, the newcomers being almost exclusively east central and southeast European countries, among them Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia; Bulgaria, Romania, and possibly Croatia stand in line to follow in 2007.² This enlargement not only adds 110 million people to the total population of the EU, but also dramatically increases the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity within it. This diversity will most certainly further grow through the continued influx of migrants from outside the Union. Within half a century the EU will thus have changed from an economic community of a few homogeneous nations to a multinational and multiethnic polity that is larger and incorporates more peoples, languages, cultures, and religions than any previous European multiethnic polity such as the Byzantine, the Habsburg, or the Ottoman empires.

The inclusion of southeast Europe is of particular relevance for the EU – and it is of great interest for ethnology and social anthropology. The Balkan Peninsula is certainly the most diverse region on our continent as regards the sheer number of countries, peoples, ethnic groups, languages, religions, and cultures. All of its countries belonged – at various times and for different periods of time – to the large historical multiethnic empires; some countries such as Bulgaria were part of the Ottoman Empire for 500 years. The integration of this multiethnic, multi-religious, and multicult-

tural region into the EU will thus add significantly to the diversity of the Union.

It is precisely this historical experience with multiculturalism that evokes either delight with “peaceful multiethnic Bosnia” as the model for multicultural Europe, or the fear that “Balkanization” may infect the EU, a fear that is based on the history of violence, conflict, and war in the Balkans, the “powder keg of Europe.” One must keep in mind, though, that the Balkan wars, including the recent wars in former Yugoslavia, were largely a result of the fact that the Balkan countries emulated the Western model of the nation-state which “presented the greatest problems from the viewpoint of the implementation of the nationalist principle of one culture, one state” (Gellner 1996: 115). After centuries of successful interethnic coexistence, the new-born southeast European nations set out to forge homogeneous entities out of the most heterogeneous region in Europe. The Western model proved inadequate not only because it created nationalism but because it turned neighbours into “others” (Wingfield 2003) or even enemies.

Before this background we must ask if the integration of the southeast European countries will be an asset or a liability for the modern multicultural societies of the European Union. Will it contribute to the gradual “Balkanization” of the Union – or can the Union profit from the centuries of interethnic experience of southeast Europe? Should the EU heed Dan Diner’s (2003) advice that in our age of postmodernity, after the end of the era of national homogenisation, we should look with more sympathy at the premodern, transnational traditions of the historical multiethnic empires, particularly those of the Ottoman Empire? Of course there is no simple answer to this question. What traditions does Diner refer to – those of the state or those of its subjects? In order to find tentative answers one certainly has to differentiate between aspects that are linked to the conditions of pre-modernity and those that are of continued relevance, and also between the level of state politics and the level of everyday life.

On the level of state politics there are probably few lessons to be learned from the pre-modern or early modern multiethnic states that were too different from our modern states and societies to be comparable to the European Union. The administrative and social

structures and institutions of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires were based on a strictly regulated hierarchical order with clearly established social inequalities. But it was precisely this homogeneity of superstructures and institutions and the social inequality which created a deep layer of shared everyday culture in both empires and which permitted a high degree of ethnic and religious diversity and an official tolerance or rather indifference towards it. Thus the EU has to find its own answers to the question of what approach to take towards diversity and immigration. The decisions of its political leaders are certainly of greatest relevance, as they provide the political and legal framework of interethnic coexistence in the EU, but one must not overestimate the influence they have on the actual processes of everyday interethnic interaction and coexistence.

If there are lessons to be learned from the southeast European countries, they can be found rather on the level of everyday practices. What were these practices of interethnic coexistence and what model of interethnic relations was behind them? Generally speaking, both in history and in the present one can distinguish four different strategies of interethnic relations, which can be described as four different models:

1. The *harmony model*, which implies that different ethnic or religious groups live peacefully together with each other in a kind of harmonious interethnic medley based on full inclusion and integration of all groups and on widespread intermarriage.

2. The *coexistence model* denotes the living side by side of various groups in a regulated, organised, and institutionalised coexistence for which partial inclusion and partial exclusion are typical; endogamy is the rule, but intermarriage is tolerated.

3. The *segregation model* demands the separation or segregation of groups living in the same territory. It is based on (mutual or unilateral) indifferent exclusion; intermarriage is avoided or forbidden outright.

4. The *conflict model* denotes the hostile segregation of groups in a given territory, based on (mutual or unilateral) hostile exclusion that can lead to attempts at assimilation and subjugation.

In southeast European reality one can observe all of these strategies – and combinations of them. There is a lot of historical evidence, though, that the harmony model of full inclusion and peaceful living together was the exception rather than the rule. Some Western intellectuals consider multicultural Sarajevo to have been heaven on earth, a harmonious mingling and medley of ethnic groups, religions, and cultures. But this harmony was more in the eyes of the beholders than in social reality in which a complex system of inclusion and segregation prevailed (see Džaja 1998).

There is evidence that the segregation model was, and is, quite relevant as a way of dealing with the ethnic or religious “other”, and that at times the conflict model prevailed, particularly at the national level. But we must note that at the local level full segregation and conflict were not the rule – and that they were usually the consequences of political events on the national level (such as in Bosnia or Kosovo in the 1990s).

The prevalent model appears to have been the coexistence model. It is based on the experience that the living together of ethnic or religious groups always tends to be fragile and precarious: coexistence in the same territory requires permanent efforts at social management in order to maintain the established balance and relations between the groups. It is, in other words, an organized and institutionalized coexistence without attempts to forcibly integrate or assimilate the other groups.

Throughout Balkan history, diversity had to be managed in everyday life, both by social groups and by individuals. This required a specific, culturally fashioned knowledge and set of attitudes, social and communicative skills and practices as well as long-term strategies, in other words: a system and a habitus of coexistence. For the management of their everyday lives most groups and individuals of the pre-modern Balkan societies needed a certain degree of a specific social competence, a competence that developed over a long period of time and was an integral part of the system of inter-ethnic coexistence. When conditions changed, new practices had to be developed and incorporated into this tradition. It is worth asking what this competence consisted of. What was the socio-cultural knowledge that enabled people to cope with diversity in everyday life?

Mind-set and Knowledge

The very basis of what is needed to manage interethnic coexistence appears to be a certain amount of socio-cultural knowledge and attitudes. Was there a specific "mind-set" or "habitus" that facilitated the coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups? How did it relate to traditional values, attitudes, and world views? A helpful precondition was certainly the fact that most Balkan peoples never had strong religious beliefs nor adhered to ideologies. Unlike West Europeans who favour universalist religious or moral systems, they rather adhere to a particularistic world-view and ethic based on the interests of their kin or some other in-group. This basic orientation produced a mentality of tolerance or rather indifference towards the beliefs and convictions of others.

In addition, it was not dogmatic Christianity or Islam that prevailed in the Balkans but "folk" versions of both with strong common pagan elements that provided a basis of shared folk beliefs. All this contributed to a high degree of religious syncretism (Filipović 1954), which included not only the veneration of the same saint or the use of the same temple by Christians and Muslims, but also visiting priests of the other denomination. It also made different value systems appear compatible and allowed the individual or the family to convert to another religion or to belong to two religions at the same time, to one of them in the open, to the other one clandestinely (such as the crypto-Christians). There is an abundance of syncretistic phenomena in the Balkans (cf. Moranjak-Bamburać 2001). Syncretism is to be observed in many sectors of the cultural system, making the coexistence of different forms and the adoption, adaptation, fusion, or assimilation of cultural influences a pervasive and continuous process. Elements of the material culture of other ethnic groups were assimilated just as easily as behaviours: only certain token objects were exempted from this interethnic cultural exchange because they functioned as ethnic markers, usually the costume or parts of it which served as symbols of ethnic identification (cf. Schenk 1973, 1994: 346f.; Georgieva 1999: 65).

An important and vital part of this mind-set was that the individuals and groups had a heightened awareness of differences and incompatibilities – and that they "knew each other." This knowl-

edge was accumulated in the course of time and consisted, on the one hand, of factual information about other groups' ways, customs, behaviours, tastes, and their material culture, particularly the ethnic and religious markers; everybody had a knowledge of, and respect for, the basic rules and practices of the other religion, e.g. their holidays and food taboos (Georgieva 1999: 69-71). A sound knowledge of other groups' ways and tastes was essential for professionals, traders, and craftsmen who wanted to cater to the needs of more than one ethnic group (see Klusch 1987, Schenk 1994: 350).

On the other hand, all groups had precise ideas and stable, stereotypical perceptions of the other groups and ascribed them clear-cut ethnic characters.³ These stereotypes, which found expression in everyday language and in many oral genres, were often prejudices and could, in case of conflict, stir hatred, but they more often provided the individual with reliable categories for everyday interactions and with stable identities. On the basis of this everyday knowledge, difference and alienness were transformed into familiar otherness, an otherness that could be handled in everyday life with the help of formalised rules of social conduct (Georgieva 1999: 66-69).

Everyday Practices, Strategies and Institutions of Interethnic Coexistence

From these basic attitudes and orientations were derived a number of practices and skills, some of which were even institutionalized. There is historical as well as present evidence that in mixed areas there was a high degree of bilingualism and trilingualism for the purposes of everyday communication; and Georgieva (1999: 66) also encountered specific rules for the choice of the language of interaction based on age and social status. Apart from bilingualism and the widespread use of a *lingua franca*, it is noteworthy that the Balkan languages exerted strong influences upon each other not only through large numbers of loan words, which in itself created a common basis for everyday communication, but also in the morphology and syntax ("*Balkan-Sprachbund*").

People were well aware that interethnic coexistence does not come by itself. In order to make it work, they developed their own "politics of coexistence", i.e., social and cultural structures and

strategies for the safeguarding of peaceful coexistence and for the reduction of intergroup tensions and conflicts. At the local level of ethnically mixed communities, these politics of coexistence persist today. Thanks to the field studies of Georgieva (1999) and Tepavicharov (1999) in mixed communities, we have empirical data on some of the practices of local political elites to handle diversity. Bulgarian communities with Christian, Muslim, and Pomak populations always had dual or triple power structures, each group having self-rule, its own power centre, and its own leaders. It was an unwritten law that one group never interfered in the other groups' business, particularly not in matters of religion where a high degree of incompatibility was taken for granted and accepted.

This tolerance and mutual acceptance was imposed by historical experience – and it was always in jeopardy: ethnic, religious, and cultural differences always produced misunderstandings and conflicts, but the question was not if such conflicts could ever be eliminated once and for all, but if there were adequate ways and accepted institutions of conflict resolution and mediation. The data show that conflict management never aimed at eliminating differences but at establishing mechanisms and enforcing measures of conflict reduction. Conscious efforts were made on all sides to prevent the disruption of the fragile interethnic balance: hotspurs and troublemakers were usually disciplined by their own group, and conflicts between persons were taken out of the contact zone and resolved within the group.

The success of interethnic coexistence rested not only on general structures and practices, but to a large extent on individuals who functioned as brokers or mediators between the groups, a class of bilingual men in higher positions such as group leaders, aldermen (cf. Pimpireva 1997: 183f.), judges (cf. Majer 1997: 127), priests, teachers, but also merchants, craftsmen, or migrant workers who had accumulated enough experience and authority to function as mediators. Local leaders in mixed communities were required to have, in addition to the “normal” prerequisites of age, high social status, wealth, integrity, and authority, outstanding qualities as social arbiters; they must have the ability to reconcile the groups, not to stress differences, to be role models, and to use their power prudently (Tepavicharov 1999: 93f.). If this was given it was almost

irrelevant what ethnic group the mayor of the community belonged to.

Contrary to the romantic ideas of some travellers or modern multiculturalists, there was no colourful medley or intermingling of ethnies and religions. Evidence from all Balkan countries indicates that there were solid barriers or "glass walls" between the ethnic and religious groups which kept largely to themselves. The maintenance of strong in-group/out-group boundaries and particularistic thinking in favour of one's own group were and are the rule. For the Ottoman period, Majer (1997: 128) noted that "in essential areas the Muslims, Christians, and Jews stayed to themselves, conducted their religious services, celebrated their holidays, sang their songs, wore their costumes ... and married among themselves." This view is still held today, for example in Bulgaria, where the "Muslims are separated from the Christians" because, in the words of an informant, "it is better for everybody to be in command of himself and to stay with his own people" (Tepavicharov 1999: 89). Inter-marriage was the rare exception and was in most countries considered as "unnatural" and a threat to the fragile balance between the ethnic and religious groups because of its high potential for intergroup and loyalty conflict (Tepavicharov 1999: 97); some groups prohibited inter-marriage altogether.

Interethnic coexistence was a necessity that resulted from the fact that ethnic or religious groups occupied more or less the same territory. The necessity of utilising this common space for subsistence and the dependence on each other put permanent pressure on all groups to cooperate and to make compromises. As for their dwellings, the groups were often spatially separated, mostly in separate neighbourhoods or quarters. Towns and cities were more mixed, but again the ethnic groups usually had their own quarters in which each group had its own social structures of kinship and neighbourhood relations, its own power structure, and its separate institutions such as churches, schools, and associations. The example of two small towns in the Hungarian *puszta*, Mezöberényi and Szekszárd, which until the end of the First World War were inhabited by three ethnic and religious groups (Calvinist and Catholic Hungarians, Protestant Slovaks, Protestant Germans), is very illustrative. On the basis of archive sources, Juliane Brandt (2005) found

that each group had their own quarters with separate infrastructures, churches, pubs, shops, and craftsmen. Endogamy was the almost absolute rule that only a few marginal persons broke. But in spite of this spatial segregation, there existed institutionalized forms of cooperation, a "system of community" resulting from economic, administrative, and political necessities. The two towns were typical of most towns not only in the puszta, but also in Transylvania and Bulgaria. The system of interethnic coexistence gradually dissolved as late as in the interwar period.

The spatial and social segregation was mitigated not only by institutions, but also by networks of friendship and neighbourhood contacts stretching across ethnic or religious boundaries. Interethnic contacts in the immediate neighbourhood were of special significance, as families would invite each other regularly on the others' religious or life-cycle holidays, and all of them would observe the traditional norms and customs that were mandatory in everyday life (Georgieva 1999: 72f., Telbizova-Sack 1999: 116-127), among them the strict rules of hospitality (cf. Stoilov 1995).

Interethnic and interreligious coexistence were also facilitated by contacts that involved the partial inclusion of the "other", mostly in the form of temporal and or ritualized inclusion. Louis Dumont (1980) has noted for India that the peaceful coexistence of the many ethnic groups on the subcontinent is based on the "ritual inclusion of the opposite", that is, the formalized and mostly symbolic inclusion of the "significant other" – and this was usually the neighbouring ethnic group in the village or town. This observation can also be made in southeast Europe, where forms of ritualized inclusion can be found quite often. These inclusions may appear trivial, but they were strictly observed and considered highly important for maintaining interethnic peace: they created a degree of contact and familiarity which kept the "other" within one's own social world and prevented him from becoming an unfamiliar and threatening alien.

Such forms of ritual inclusion were (and are): (1) ritual visits on holidays: families would invite each other regularly on the others' religious or life-cycle holidays; (2) ritual hospitality based on strict rules (cf. Stoilov 1995); (3) the inclusion of marginal or despised groups in all kinds of rituals: in most Balkan countries the gypsies

(or Roma) were (and still are) largely segregated and excluded from the dominant society, but on all important feasts and festivals they are fully integrated as musicians and singers — in this function they hold a central position and make the majority population “dance to their music”; and (4) ritual kinship was a specific and important institution in the Balkans: it often extended across ethnic or religious boundaries, usually for practical, economic, or “political” reasons of establishing friendly relations with families on the other side of an ethnic divide.

In parts of the Habsburg Empire, one of the institutions explicitly geared toward facilitating interethnic coexistence was the tradition of “exchange children” (*Tauschkinder*). In Hungary and Slovakia, for instance, it was common practice to send children to live with a partner family from another ethnic group for one year: they learned not only the other group’s language, but also “their ways” (Liszka 1996). This was indeed a very efficient way to instill the knowledge, the attitudes, and the skills of interethnic coexistence as part of enculturation and socialization in childhood.

What is the significance of this interethnic coexistence in southeastern Europe that lasted for so many centuries for the present problems of the European Union? Does the way in which these societies organised their lives and solved the problems of their everyday existence have any bearing on the problems arising from the rapidly increasing diversity in the EU? It appears that the EU is in need of its own politics of interethnic coexistence. Given all the fundamental differences between the historical empires and the present EU, Dan Diner’s advice to look with more sympathy at the traditions of the historical multiethnic empires may sound unrealistic if one has in mind the premodern state; his advice should be heeded, though, with regard to the system of interethnic coexistence. This sympathetic look back must, however, be based on sound historical and ethnographic data. By engaging in this research, historians, ethnologists, and historical anthropologists can truly contribute to the solving of present social problems.

Let me point out a few such aspects of the traditional system of interethnic coexistence that may be useful for the present situation.

1. The transformation of threatening alienness into familiar otherness is a very fundamental aspect. It was achieved on the

cognitive and the affective level; on the cognitive one by means of passing on knowledge (including stereotypical knowledge) about the relevant groups or peoples. This also included the learning of languages, so that there was a class of bilingual persons. On the affective level, interethnic coexistence was facilitated through a heightened sensitivity for other groups and for their signs and signals. Both aspects of the traditional system are very well applicable to the present situation: having more knowledge about, and sensitivity for, neighbouring peoples and ethnic groups and thus turning their alienness into familiar and manageable otherness is good advice also today.

2. The increased awareness of difference created a greater acceptance of (familiar) otherness, of cultural diversity. For modern democratic nations this acceptance of otherness is a structural problem, but it seems to be an important prerequisite for interethnic coexistence in Europe. It has to be accompanied, though, by the awareness that the degree of accepted difference is clearly limited by the basic norms and values and by the legal codes of the member states as well as by the political and legal framework of the European Union.

3. The question of social and spatial segregation and of group autonomy is certainly one of the thorniest problems for modern open societies. It is noteworthy that in this respect the reality of modern states corresponds to some extent with that of the bygone empires: ethnic neighbourhoods have long become a reality in many Western countries and in some cases informal parallel power structures of minority groups have been accepted and integrated into the larger political systems. But while group segregation was the norm in the historical multiethnic empires, the development of parallel societies is now considered as negative, because it contradicts basic principles of modern societies.

4. The ritual and symbolic inclusion of minority groups by the majority groups in a formalized manner has great relevance as a symbolic recognition of the minority groups, particularly if it has high visibility and publicity.

5. Interethnic encounters occurred most intensely in small and well-defined contexts, i.e., at the grass-roots level of village or neighbourhood contacts, and under the pressure of economic or other necessities. In our open, anonymous urban societies, similar contexts can still be found in small communities and urban neighbourhoods, but more frequently and typically in institutions and at the workplace where cooperation is vital. Efforts at creating interethnic coexistence and cooperation must therefore start from, and focus on, such small institutional contexts.

6. Interethnic relations are fragile and the equilibrium can easily be disturbed. Conflict reduction and resolution was therefore a central point in the traditional system of interethnic coexistence, for which there were specific rules and mechanisms. It appears that modern institutions are also in need of such rules and mechanisms: keeping conflicts out of the contact zone of ethnic or religious groups is a rule that can also be applied to contemporary schools, offices, joint ventures, or multinational teams. Likewise, leaders with a heightened intercultural knowledge and sensitivity and with social skills as arbiters and mediators are needed in traditional village communities as well as in urban neighbourhoods, in institutions, and at the workplace.

7. The most important quality that many people in southeast Europe had and that is required today is intercultural competence. Managers and expatriates, teachers and social workers, medical doctors and nurses are increasingly expected to have the social competence to deal adequately with clients and patients, students, and neighbours from other cultural milieux. Many of the qualities that constitute this intercultural competence are to be found in the traditional system of interethnic coexistence that evolved over centuries in the multiethnic regions of Europe. The competence fell prey to the emerging modern nation states and their insistence on national homogeneity. With Europe's move toward a multiethnic and multicultural Union we may have to rethink some of the assumptions, attitudes, and behaviours based on the idea of the homogeneous nation state. Although we know full well that our modern societies differ fundamentally from the despotic pre-modern empires, a critical ethnographic look at the everyday man-

agement of diversity, at the traditional practices of ordinary people, can, as I hope to have shown, nevertheless be enlightening.

Notes

- 1 Only Belgium and Spain stand out as ethnically more heterogeneous countries.
- 2 The other Balkan countries and Turkey have the prospect of joining the EU in the next decade.
- 3 Cf. Kürti (1997: 42), Danova (1995), J. Roth (1996), Höpken (1998), Suppan (1998), K. Roth (1998).

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