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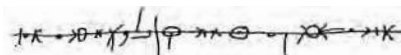
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The Ethnicization of Agrarian Reforms: The Case of Interwar Yugoslavia



Christian Giordano

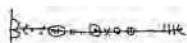
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ABSTRACT

Land reform is a legal means for settling the agrarian question. In central and South-Eastern Europe where farming is a major occupation, such reforms have served to nationalize – ethnically homogenize – the nation's land. The analysis of such reforms in Yugoslavia during the period between the two world wars shows how land was systematically distributed in favour of those who were part of the titular nation while, at the same time, discriminating against ethnic minorities. Instead of settling the agrarian question, these reforms fuelled the conflict between ethno-national groups to the point of a quasi-civil war situation. The social memory of the discriminated groups is still today coined by these negative historical experiences, as the case of Kosovo show

KEYWORDS

Agrarian reforms, ethnicization, interwar Yugoslavia, nationalism, modernization



Introduction: “Staatsnation” and the “Purity” Myth

Both in Western and Eastern Europe the specific combination of territory, language, creed, citizenship and / or nationality, is generally perceived as an invariable and inviolable heritage of individual and collective “identities” (Conte 1995, 138). It is a widespread belief that can be traced back even to the most common aspects of everyday life. This belief reaches its political-institutional achievement in the concept of “Staatsnation” and its various practical applications that can be found, with few exceptions, throughout the Old Continent. The idea of “Staatsnation”, a German term of French origin as Stéphane Pierré-Caps aptly pointed out (Pierré-Caps 1995, 56), is based on the doctrine according to which each “nation” must have its own territorial State and each State must consist of one “nation” only (Altermatt 1996, 53).

This formula has guided the whole European history from the early 1800s on. In terms of territory, this motto, forerunner of such tragic events, can be phrased as follows; each “nation” has a right to its “land” which is under the monopoly of one “nation” only.

It is not surprising that the past two centuries have been marked by repeated efforts to make the single national territories more and more ethnically and culturally homogeneous, especially in Central and Eastern Europe where the principle of “Staatsnation” was applied much later than in Western Europe; that is, only after the downfall of the imperial “Vielvölkerstaaten”. The processes of “ethno-cultural re-composition” aiming at “ethnic purity” of national States have been carried out through a fearsome and ongoing series of boundary revisions, forced assimilations, expulsions, aimed and planned immigrations, deportations, purifications and ethnic wars, genocides, restorations and secessions. The Nazi detractors of the “schwebendes Volkstum” (Conte

1995: 54), the enthusiastic upholders of the Hitlerian “gardener State” (Bauman 1996, 43 ff.), and the “ethnic cleansing engineers” in the Balkans (Grmek, Gjidara and Šimac 1993), notwithstanding the use of different means, share a common end; the elimination of any “ethno-cultural heterogeneity” within the State where they live and act.

Although the above-mentioned phenomena refer mainly to Central and Eastern Europe, it would be a mistake to think that Western Europe has not been affected by similar shock waves of homogenization. In fact, through the “très longue durée” perspective there is the pressing sequence of the “Albigensian Crusade” (1208-1244), the “Massacre of St. Bartholomew” (1572), the expulsion of “marranos” and “moriscos” from Portugal and Spain (1492), the various wars of religion which bloodied Western Europe during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (15th and 16th century), up to purifying attempts which later will be essential to the slow construction of future “Staatnationen” in this area of the Old Continent. Probably, it would be anachronistic to label these cases as deliberate “ethno-cultural homogenization”; however, avoiding the trap of evolutionary mechanism, it would be a good idea to keep in mind the “time lag” or, better yet, the “déalage historique” between Western and Eastern Europe rather than a presumed substantial difference.

Four main periods can be identified in the various processes of “ethnic separation” that concerned almost all the “Staatnationen” of Central and Eastern Europe over the last two centuries. Their virulence was laden with consequences for the structure of the entire continent.

The first period was predominantly in the Balkans, immediately after the creation of the first Nation-states in the 19th century. Vast sections of populations of Turkish origin or simply of Muslim faith were forced to leave the region. As administrators and civil servants of the Ottoman Empire, they did indeed represent the hated occupiers,

but members of social strata that had nothing or little in common with the ruling class were involved in the expulsion process as well. During the great „Crisis in the Orient“, which led to the bloody Russian-Turkish war, from 1875 to 1878 alone a million and a half people were repatriated (Sundhaussen 1997, 87). Considering the times and the area involved, it was an exceptional movement of people.

The second virulent phase was between 1913 and 1925. It was characterized by the forced transfer of whole minoritarian ethnic groups and yet it was internationally recognized and guaranteed. In the diplomatic language of those days, it was euphemistically termed as a „population exchange“. Some examples illustrate the „homogenization“ strategies through „ethnic separation“. Substantial groups of Albanians from Kosovo and western Macedonia were transferred to Turkey after the Balkan Wars (1913) mainly because of their religion. Particularly after the creation of the Kingdom of the Serbians, Croats and Slovenians, they were substituted by Serbian, Montenegrin, Croatian and Slovenian people with the intention of „re-Slavizing“ the region. The so-called „population exchange“ between Greece and Turkey was even more dramatic. It was decreed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which ratified a series of reciprocal expulsions and hasty migrations caused by the Greek military catastrophe during the reckless campaign in Asia Minor. After the tremendous defeat, Greece was overrun by refugees from the coasts of Western Anatolia plus the Greeks from the Black Sea area and the Caucasus who, since 1917, had been fleeing from the repressions of the new Bolshevik regime. A country of 4,5 million inhabitants faced the arrival of 1,3 million refugees. At the same time, the „population exchange“ provided for the departure of the “citizens of Islam faith“, mostly Turkish, but also Albanians.

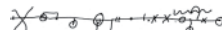
The third phase of “ethnic homogenization” includes the decade between 1940 and 1950 that was characterized by the Nazi



policy of annihilation, transfer and expulsion of whole ethnic groups or supposed-so and by Stalinist deportations and purges. Along with the holocaust of the so-called "transnational minorities" (Kende 1992, 13 ff.), that is Jews and Roma, there were massive population movements in all of Central and Eastern Europe which changed the ethnic map of this part of the continent considerably. 11,5 million Germans were expelled from the "Ostgebiete", while 3 million Poles, 2 million of which from the regions that became part of the Soviet Union after the Second World War, settled in Silesia and in the south of Eastern Prussia. Thus, Poland became an almost mono-ethnic country, quite consistent with the ideal of the „Staatsnation“. Even the treaties between Czechoslovakia and Hungary and between the latter and Yugoslavia, which provided for reciprocal "population exchanges" as well, date back to the same period, immediately after the Second World War. Finally, Stalin consolidated his conquests in the Western part of the Soviet Union through a policy of "planned", and often imposed, "mobility". On the one hand, this involved the deportation of populations considered "accomplices of the enemy", therefore "traitors of the great patriotic war" (Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, etc.), to Siberia or central Asia. On the other, it involved substituting them with more "reliable" immigrants, mainly of Slavic origin such as Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians (Conte and Giordano 1995, 28 ff.).

The fourth virulent phase of "ethnic homogenization", which can be called a "reversion to the Nation-state", is the wave of "political separations" that has been devastating Central and Eastern Europe over the past fifteen years. It can be traced back to socialist Bulgaria with the so-called solution of nationality problems. Actually, the solution was the expulsion and / or forced assimilation of "ethnic Turks" in the second half of the 1980s. The phase continued during the 1990s with the disintegration of the three countries born after the First

World War through a multi-ethnic and multinational "logic", namely Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. New and old nations, originated from this process, are all based on the "Staatsnation" principle. Therefore, the war in Bosnia is fully in tune with this tragic, yet century-old "logic" of „homogenization“. Given the historical background, it would have been quite surprising if the war had not broken out. The Treaty of Dayton, even with obvious formal differences, is nothing but a reissue of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) in which an "ethnic re-composition" project lurks behind a hypocritical façade. With the explosion of the conflict in Kosovo, the "humanitarian catastrophe" now has the bitter taste of an old "déjà vu" that follows the same persisting pattern of "ethnic homogenization". Aside from political modalities, one could even picture the final setting: the ethno-territorial separation of Serbians from Albanians. We cannot hope against hope, however, because further conflicts are at hand.



Land Reforms and „Ethnic Re-composition“

In very broad terms, a land reform implies a redefining of landed property rights through State legislative acts. From a sociological point of view, a land reform answers two needs: one of a political and the other of an economic nature, each with a specific type of landowner as R.P. Dore pointed out in his classic studies on land redistribution in Japan (Dore 1965, 487 seq.). In the first case, landowners monopolize domination structures deriving from conquest or feudalization processes. In the second case, they are mainly economic actors or in Marxian terms, they are the representatives of the "rural wing of the bourgeoisie" who might wield an indirect power due to their wealth and contacts with politicians and administrators of urban origin. Obviously enough, processes of expropriation and



land redistribution imply radical changes in the political asset of the society involved much more so in the first case than in the second one.

Territorial concerns and, therefore, the definition of land regime are basic duties that Nation-states claimed from the very beginning, almost with no exception. Hence, the legislative instrument of land reform is the cornerstone of any territorial policy that pursues a heightening of national cohesion and unity. The specific historical heritage of Central and Eastern European Nation-states that rose from the late disintegration of multi-ethnic empires (with few exceptions: Hungary) essentially determined land reforms with a strong disruptive impact on the preceding domination system, at least on paper. Some examples can better explain the reasons behind this choice. Poland and Romania of the „Old Kingdom“, after attaining their independence again, were confronted by powerful „autochthonous“ landowners with feudal or patrimonial backgrounds („Szlachta“ and „boyars“) who, besides their political privileges, had considerable economic means built upon the „second serfdom“ system. On the other hand instead, the Baltic countries had to recognize that the land was in the hands of a few „foreign“ families of feudal lords, mainly of German and Polish descent. Finally, Balkan Europe, which had just been freed of the „Turkish yoke“, took care to demolish the patrimonial aspects of the political-administrative structures inherited from the Ottoman Empire that guaranteed usufruct or appropriation of vast-landed property to officials.

In substance, therefore, land reforms in national States that attained a late independence were meant to reach the following goals:

- carry through an „act of justice“ mainly by retrenching the latifundist regime in order to apportion „the land to the tillers“. Land reforms were intended to find a solution to the „social question“, which, given the specific socio-economic situation in

Central and East Europe (as in several other societies as well), is above all an „agrarian question“.

- create an economic basis for the rise or growth of a rural „middle class“ or „fifth estate“ of wealthy peasants who could rapidly modernize agriculture, which in those days was considered indispensable to a successful industrialization policy. According to the socialist version of rural modernization policy, land reform is the cornerstone on which agricultural collectivization is based as Friedrich Engels states in his famous essay „Die Bauernfrage in Frankreich und in Deutschland“ (Engels 1977, Vol. XXII, 483 ff.). Therefore, the idea underlying this project is rather the formation of a rural proletariat.

- „nationalize“ the State’s territory by „ethnicizing“ landed property: that is, apportioning it preferably to the sole members of the „entitled nation“.

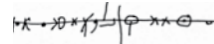
This last point, which generally is not officially stated in land redistribution policies, becomes the heart of reform actions, as in several postcolonial societies (Kenya, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, etc.) shaken by violent upsurges of fiery nationalism like the Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya (Warriner 1969, 11 ff.).

As far as Central and Eastern-Europe are concerned, the exigency of a land reform rises at first as the need to resolve the „social question“ that, in this area, is more of an „agrarian question“, as already mentioned. From the turn of the century on, the indebtedness and impoverishment of the rural masses, usury, overpopulation and unemployment in the farmlands, emigration, a pulverized small and medium property, and the persistence of the latifundia led to further precarious living conditions in Central and Eastern-Europe’s rural regions. A lame and, at times, entirely off-the-mark industrialization process, absolutely unable to employ the agricultural work force surplus, heightened an already dire, critical situation. Added to this is the international recession between the two World Wars, which

mainly encumbered agricultural produce prices and exports.

In most of Europe's central and eastern countries, these economic factors will create a widespread atmosphere of social tension that will often break out into bloody riots as the well-known one of the Romanian farmers in the Spring of 1907 (Castellan 1994, 51 ff.). This situation of endemic rebelliousness, reinforced by sweeping historical events such as the Russian Revolution, summons the phantom of Central and Eastern-European societies' "bolshevization" among the great landowners. Even the more conservative classes see the stringent need to bring forth a land reform that will abate frictions, protests and conflicts through land redistribution. Therefore, it is no coincidence that major land reforms with a Liberal background were undertaken in the period between the two World Wars. The two main goals of the reform process seem to have been an "equitable" property distribution and agricultural "modernization" (see Milena Angelova, this volume). For these same reasons, some Western European watchers and experts would be pleased by projects tending towards deep socio-economic changes in the backward rural areas of the Old Continent's central-eastern areas (Ancel 1930; Mirkovitch 1934).

However, under the influence of increasing nationalisms, this attitude will change rapidly and the "ethnicization" of the land distribution will become the main characteristic of several land reforms in this region. Thus, land reforms will turn into legislative actions of a more political nature than a socio-economic one aimed at changing the ethnic aspect of historically mixed regions neighbouring disputed, changeable, uncertain and essentially unstable boundaries. From this geopolitical point of view, due to the ethnic homogenization and re-composition processes involved, land reforms are conceived ever more often as a major remedy to the "variable geometry" of national territories which has always ailed Europe's central and eastern States.



The Agrarian Reform in Yugoslavia between the two World Wars

The century-old Ottoman domination in Europe ended in 1913 after the second Balkan War. The "sick man on the Bosphorus" held only a small territory, namely present-day European Turkey. Serbia and Montenegro united after WWI in the Kingdom of Serbians, Croats and Slovenians, which, in turn, became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929, took over most of the "freed" regions; i.e. northern Macedonia and Kosovo. However, the Ottoman legacy was laden with problems. In the first place, Serbia and Montenegro faced an archaic social and economic system, a consequence of the breakdown of the original imperial patrimonialism based on the "timar" institution. The sultan, as absolute ruler and sole owner of the land, entrusted military commanders with collecting tributes and recruiting soldiers. In exchange for these bureaucratic duties, the sultan allotted them non-hereditary lands termed "timar". The "timar" included the "ciftlik": lands and real estate that the "timarian" could exploit directly for his family needs. Between the 16th and the 18th century, while the centralized power was waning, the military commanders seized inalienable property that belonged to farmers and repeatedly appropriated lands of the "timar" on a hereditary basis. Therefore, the "ciftlik" areas were remarkably broadened although several remained quite small and would never become large landed estates. Furthermore, the "ciftlik" were privatized de facto becoming outright allodium lands. 19th century reforms, despite Koranic law, will give a legal foundation to this unsettled situation and the term "ciftlik" will become synonymous with private property. While striving to modernize and lead their countries closer to European standards, Serbia, Montenegro and later Yugoslavia encountered the problem of dismantling this semi-patrimonialist structure that was unanimously considered unjust



and utterly obsolete. Therefore, at the time, the most obvious solution to this problem was to promote a land reform (see Kaiti Aroni-Tsichli, this volume). This was also the authoritative opinion of eminent foreign experts, such as renowned French geographer Jacques Ancel, who knew the region well, having been in loco during WWI (Ancel 1930, 1). According to all these Occidental experts, researchers as well as travellers and diplomats, the „ciftlik“ was perceived, on the one hand, as the symbol of an execrable administration and low economic productivity, and, on the other hand, as the bulwark of an agrarian system based on semi-serfdom social relations that implied exorbitant taxes besides arbitrary and iniquitous services for the peasants (Schultze-Jena 1927, 50 ff.). Present-day researches have re-examined this institution reaching more differentiated conclusions (Adanir, 1979); in those days instead, the „ciftlik“ was perceived, figuratively speaking, as an insult to civilization. In light of this outlook, the land reform was launched in an area whose economic situation was deplorable, to say the least - northern Macedonia and Kosovo - not only taking into account the „ciftlik“, but also a fifty-year span of political instability marked by uprisings and wars. Therefore, these two regions were characterized by massive land abandonment and the utter insecurity of a territory overrun by bands of irregular troops halfway between a liberation warfare and plain banditry. Overall, however, the Yugoslav land reform required an elaborate series of measures pivoting upon colonization. In fact, by the end of the second Balkan War a conspicuous migratory trend ensued, more or less forced, mainly towards Turkey and, alternatively, Albania. The migration concerned „ciftlik“ owners of Turk or Albanian descent who were leaving the country expecting upcoming changes of the landed property régime. Around 1913-1914 autochthonous families of Slavic ancestry had already begun an unforeseen takeover of the deserted lands or were buying them at low prices (Roux,

1992: 191). The governments of Serbia and Montenegro immediately tried to check this tendency. A law concerning the peopling of the „freed“ regions, which provided for State management of all deserted lands plus all lands lacking a property title, was promulgated in Montenegro in February 1914. This law may be considered a prologue to the land reform itself, whose promulgation took an incredible amount of time - from 1919 to 1934 - because of several additions and amendments. These few data give proof to the significant efforts of the Yugoslav government to modernize agriculture in the two above-mentioned peripheral and economically backward regions.

Undoubtedly, the pillar of this complex reform action was the decree dated September 24, 1920 that regulated the „colonization“ of the new southern regions, in which „colonization“ meant the State's land grants to farmers. This project had two main aims:

- land distribution to the most poverty-stricken, autochthonous rural population through the subdivision of „ciftlik“;
- settlement of farmers from other areas of Yugoslavia on the deserted properties and former State or municipal property (Ancel 1930, 58 ff.).

The allocated plots were between 4 and 5 ha, congruent with family unit size. According to the promoters of the reform, this amount of land would be enough to guarantee an entire family's subsistence. However, most of the land in Macedonia and Kosovo was unproductive and soon the allocated plot extension proved to be inadequate (Ancel, 1930, 60). This already suggests how the first stages of the reform were indeed superficial, chaotic and irrational. Moreover, there were no plans for a subsequent establishment of infrastructures. In 1923, the Yugoslav government, coping with the operation's tangible shortcomings, undertook road, canal and rural dwelling construction, swampland drainage, fight against malaria, farmer's professional training, promotion of cooperatives (Roux, 1992: 192). To complete the reform process, further government de-

crees enacted between 1931 and 1934 concerning colonization, postulated the arrival of numerous farmers in Macedonia and Kosovo from other regions of the country (Roux 1992, 193).

At the time, several Western-European experts on rural problems were favourably impressed by the accomplishments reckoned as evidence of effective modernization. In his book about colonization in Macedonia, Jacques Ancel praised the Yugoslav land reform as regards to the wonders worked in Old Serbia and Kosovo (Ancel 1930, 2).

However, the Yugoslav land reform was not only a means to promote socio-economic development, as it appeared at the time to the enraptured foreign watchers. Nowadays, it is a well-known fact that an ethnic homogenization project linked to a clearly nationalistic policy, adopted especially by Serbia ever since the second half of the 18th century, lurked behind the “progressive” façade. In fact, in 1878 this country had been able to expel Albanians from the Upper Morava River basin, a territory assigned to Serbia by the Treaty of Berlin (Roux, 1992: 187). Later, Nikola Pasic (Serbian Prime Minister from 1909 to 1918) took up this notion of de-Albanizing and simultaneously re-Slavizing the south of future Yugoslavia. He estimated to attain this project within twenty years (Roux 1992, 187). This plan was resumed by the Yugoslav land reform after WWI and, as already mentioned, concerned only the southern regions of the new State, i.e. known to be a territory with vast areas of Albanian predominance. From a present-day standing, influenced by now by ideals of “multiculturalism”, such an undertaking might seem monstrous. At the time, however, projects of ethnic homogenization via agricultural colonizations, i.e. more or less forced migrations, were deemed wholly appropriate, if not expedient to increase the political stability of a region, as in the specific case of the Balkan area. The “normality” of such procedures, which we might define “post-imperialist”, has been skilfully highlighted by Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker

1996, 10 and 148-178). Corroborated by the approbation of the international community and firmly believing in the historical right due to their nation, as well as to the recent settlement of Albanians in that territory, Serbians and Montenegrins had no doubts concerning the legitimacy of changing the ethnic composition of these two regions. Albanians were seen as invaders or occupiers because for centuries they had collaborated with the Ottoman power often as high-ranking civil service officials. Moreover, Albanians were regarded as “Turks”, in the first place, because of their Islam faith and, secondly, because their national identity had only recently become apparent; at the turn of the century, Albanians had obtained only vague regional and international acknowledgements. The same religious faith plus a real similarity of some everyday behaviours, especially public ones, could actually give rise to fabrications that would be easily employed by nationalistic policies aimed at an ethnic composition shift in the southern regions. Therefore, Macedonia and Kosovo, the latter acknowledged as the “cradle of the Serbian nation”, had to be “freed” not only from the Ottoman domain, but also from the intolerable and unmanageable “foreign” – not Slav – population. The true logic behind the land reform is in this last sentence.

It was not so much the need to modernize southern Yugoslavia as the eagerness to strengthen the “national element” by re-Slavizing the two regions (Roux 1992, 191). Consequently, the “ciftlik” liquidation was not principally a program to abolish an unjust and entirely corrupt archaic semi-patrimonialism; it was a scheme to seize the land of a class of landowners who were regarded as “alien” because of their ethnic background. The predominance of an “ethnic logic” instead of a “social” one behind the elimination of “ciftlik” is confirmed mainly by the fact that most “ciftlik” in Macedonia and Kosovo were expropriated merely and tacitly because their owners were not chiefly of Slav origin, although their “ciftlik” were



below average size; therefore, quite unlike the redistributed large estates (Roux 1992, 194). As Ancel notes as well, just before the land reform, the “ciftlik“ owners in southern Yugoslavia were not like the rich absentee “beg” who lived in Istanbul, yet collected a specific income in kind from their landed property (Ancel 1930, 60). In southern Yugoslavia there were average farmers mainly of Albanian descent whose land was tilled by servants (Ancel 1930, 60; Roux 1992, 194) and not a class of “Rentenkapitalisten” with a “parasitic” mentality (Bobek 1962). In fact, only 37 of the 6,973 “ciftlik“ catalogued by the land reform administrators exceeded 500 ha, while 75% were below 50 ha and half of this percentage was not above 20 ha (Roux 1992, 194). Although this data indicates the presence of a rural middle class “in statunascendi” – the ideal aim of several land reforms – “ciftlik“ were declared State property without exception and, subsequently, allotted for free to Slav “stock“ tenants leaving the former owners with a quota from 5 to 15 ha (Roux 1992, 194). The “ethnic“ project of “(re)Slavization“ of Albanian lands in the southern regions, chiefly in Kosovo, is even more unmistakable in the colonization policy. Agrarian colonization was a remarkable undertaking charged with symbolic consequences, particularly in the so-called “cradle of the Serbian nation”. The goal was to re-establish the supposed primordial Slavic nucleus through settlements of immigrants from other areas of Yugoslavia. More than 100,000 ha, over one fourth of Kosovo’s tillable land, was apportioned to 12,000 or up to 14,000 families, according to different sources (Roux 1992, 195). To evaluate the extent of the reform, a further amount of 60,000 ha apportioned to 14,000 local allottee families must also be taken into account.

In line with the prevailing “Yugoslavist“ ideology of the time and propagated by renowned geographer Jovan Cvijić – confirmed believer of a historical ethno-national fusion amongst southern Slavs (Cvijić 1918) – the newcomers hailed from

various regions of the country. The settlers’ geographic origin shows that 76.4% – a vast majority – came from Montenegro and Serbia, 11% from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1.2% from Vojvodina, while 4.4% arrived even from Croatia (Roux 1992, 196). Since authorities wished to avoid the immigrants’ dispersion, they were settled in specific colonization areas from which Albanians were banned. In fact, if the latter owned any land within these areas, they would be expropriated and then compensated either with low quality lands far away from towns or with inadequate indemnities (Roux 1992, 195). A veritable ethnic segregation strategy was forthcoming.

However, these were not the only discriminations connected with the agrarian colonization that Albanians from that area had to withstand. In Metohija (nowadays western Kosovo, near the present border with Albania) only 0.4 ha of tillable land per person were left to farmers of non-Slavic origin. Concurrently, agrarian courts of law would rarely uphold any appeals filed (Roux 1992, 195). This territorial ethnic appropriation struggle went amiss and the implicit nationalistic policy of the Yugoslavian land reform fell short. One of the main reasons for the fiasco in Kosovo was certainly the demographic issue due to the prolificacy of the rural class, especially those of Albanian descent. This phenomenon and the settlers’ arrival plus the low chances of internal or external emigration at the time brought about a case of rural overpopulation in the region. A national and international drop in produce prices, meaning lower incomes for farmers, made things even worse.

It is not surprising that in 1930 ca. interethnic relations worsened, giving rise to strong tensions between Slavs and Albanians, peaking in a violent atmosphere strewn with clashes and outrages (Roux 1992, 199). The political and intellectual “élites“ saw this crescendo of interethnic clashes as proof of the political weakness of the land reform and the need for more drastic measures to fight back Albanian

expansion in the “cradle of the Serbian nation”. At this time, more definite projects, which indeed correspond to present-day “cleansing” or “ethnic purification”, arose and multiplied for the “transfer of Albanians” (Grmek, Gjidara, and Šimac 1993). The strongest upholder of this new policy which should have strengthened the (re) Slavization of Kosovo, begun but not completed by the land reform, was certainly Vasa Čubrilović, an eminent representative of the Serbian intelligentsia, professor at the Literature Department of Belgrade University, besides being a cabinet member of several post-war Yugoslav governments (Grmek, Gjidara and Šimac 1993, 149 ff.). In his famous lecture “The expulsion of Albanians” held at Belgrade’s Serbian Cultural Circle on March 7, 1937, this author proved the relationship between the ethno-political failure of the land reform, especially as regards to colonization on the one hand, and the need to relocate Albanians (Gasparini 1999, 1 ff.). The closing statements of this text, which the “ethnic cleansing engineers” of present-day former Yugoslavia regard as “sacred”, is worth quoting verbatim:

“Compte tenu de tout ce qui vient d'être dit, ce n'est pas par hasard que, dans l'analyse de la colonisation du sud, nous partons de la conception selon laquelle le seul moyen efficace pour résoudre ce problème, c'est le transfert massif des Albanais. La colonisation graduelle n'a pas eu de succès chez nous, pas plus que dans les autres pays. Lorsque le pouvoir d'Etat désire intervenir, dans l'intérêt de son propre élément, dans la lutte pour la terre, il ne [...] peut réussir que s'il agit brutalement. Sinon, l'aborigène installé sur sa terre natale et qui [...] est acclimaté est toujours plus fort que le colon. Dans notre cas, il faut d'autant plus tenir compte que nous avons affaire à une race rude, bien implantée, résistante, et féconde, dont feu Cvijic disait qu'elle est la plus expansive dans les Balkans. De 1870 à 1914, l'Allemagne a dépensé des milliards de marks pour coloniser graduellement ses territoires de l'Est, en achetant des terres aux Polonais, mais la fécondité des mères polonaises

a eu dessus sur l'organisation et l'argent allemands.” (quoted from Grmek, Gjidara and Šimac 1993:184).¹

This drastic program, as similar ones by Serbian intellectuals and politicians, remained a dead letter due to the upcoming war which led to Yugoslavia’s “first dismemberment” in the Spring of 1941, while eastern Macedonia and most of Kosovo were annexed to “Great Albania” under Italian control. As was to be expected, the trend shifted since the assimilation and expulsion policy was aimed at Slavs now, especially against homesteaders who had settled from the 1920s onwards. Under Marshal Tito’s establishment of the „second Yugoslavia“, pre-war boundaries were reinstated, but the “Albanian issue” was only “set aside” up to the 1980s when strong interethnic tensions flared up again in Kosovo: the onset of the present tragedy. Over these past ten-fifteen years, the “transfer of Albanians” issue, devised between the two World Wars as an extension of the land reform, reoccurs preemptorily in the Balkans bearing hatred and death.

In conclusion, the Yugoslav land reform was surely not a prior instance of “ethnic cleansing”, but it certainly was a relevant factor of ethnic tension escalation in the southern regions, especially in Kosovo. Undoubtedly it can be interpreted as a primary “historical antecedent” to the conflicts of this millennium’s end consequent to Yugoslavia’s “second dismemberment”.



Comprehending Land Reform Experiences in Yugoslavia: Some Theoretical Remarks

The socio-anthropological analysis of land reform in Yugoslavia between the two World Wars shows how a law enacted to solve the “social question”, i.e., aimed at decreasing social disparities and promoting the modernization of rural economy, went on to become an important instrument at the service of the homogenization of eth-

1) “Taking into consideration all aspects, it is not far-fetched that analyzing southern colonization, we have reached the conclusion that the only effective way to solve this problem is a mass transfer of Albanians. Gradual colonization was not successful here as in other countries. When the State wants to intervene to safeguard its own interests, its own land, it can only do so by acting ruthlessly. If not, the aboriginal, settled and acclimatized in his native land, is always stronger than a colonizer. In our case, we must also bear in mind that we are dealing with a tough race, deeply rooted, hardy and prolific; as Cvijić notes, it is one of the most widespread in the Balkans. From 1870 to 1914, Germany spent billions of marks buying land from the Poles to gradually colonize its eastern territories, but the fertility of Polish mothers defeated German organization and capital.”

nically and culturally complex regions. Therefore, the scheme to transform historically multi-ethnic territories into mono-ethnic ones was integral to the entire land reform project. In South-Eastern Europe in particular, as the exemplary case of land reform in Yugoslavia between the two World Wars shows, the realization of these mono-ethnic territories was implemented through significant population movements, which, however, came short of reshaping the ethnic composition of the regions involved. (Roux 1992, 201). "Peasant studies" researchers have essentially disregarded these migratory waves aimed at changing the ethnic composition of specific regions in order to homogenize the national States. This is probably due to an approach focusing chiefly on the development process of rural economies and societies in extra-European countries regarded as backward and peripheral, African and Asian ones in particular (Bernstein and Brass 1996-1997).

It was Ernest Gellner who devised a Weberian ideal-type he styled "Ruritania" (Gellner 1983, 58 ff.), the name itself clearly pointing up the rural character of this fictional national entity. Gellner, therefore, wanted to highlight the key role of rurality as an aggregate of symbolic and political resources with which nations in Central and Eastern Europe having specific ethnic identities could be built. An analysis of what could be defined as Ruritanian ideology and its implementation in Yugoslavia shows that it is based on four strictly interconnected key notions: ethnic nation, rurality, territory and land. Therefore, the politically-constructed correspondence between ethnic nation and rurality, given also the associated correlation between ethnic nation and territory on the one hand and the likewise assumed one between rurality and land on the other, implies another politically-constructed equation of land with territory. This means that landed property not only represents an economic asset or a social resource, but is also and foremost regarded as a nationally-significant symbolic

capital. Accordingly, if we observe a strict correlation between ethnic nation and rurality in terms of political ideology and social practices, then we can almost certainly add that land, thus also the farm, village etc., is regarded as a sacred fragment of the national territory. The Yugoslavian land reform as implemented in the Kosovo between the two World Wars would thus appear to confirm Deema Kaneff's statement according to which during the period of the reorganization of the agricultural sector in post-socialist Bulgaria the land becomes national territory (Kaneff 2002, 180 ff.).

The Yugoslavian land reform was, thus, a means to further inflame conflicting nationalisms. In turn, this bolstered the socio-political circumstances that fostered the growth of antagonistic practices and ideologies based on processes of self- and hetero-ethnicization. Up to the land reform, these interethnic tensions had been sporadic and rather mild phenomena. Yet, viewing interethnic relations in rural Yugoslavia as idyllic would be misleading. Social life was typical of the "ethnic divided societies". Communities tended to ignore and accommodate each other rather than confront each other.

Together with the new ways to access the land – a crucial resource at the time – came an increasingly strained atmosphere laden with interethnic tension that escalated into reciprocal acts of violence, both physical and symbolic. Ultimately, the land reform, with its strategies of "inclusion" and "exclusion", to a great extent helped build or emphasize "ethnic differences" and boundaries between "we" and "they", clearly visible to this day as in the specific case of Kosovo. In these cases, land redistribution in accordance with "ethnic" criteria turned out to be an important "historical precedent" that, emerging from the deepest layers of collective memory, seeps into the current management of interethnic relations. Therefore, it is not surprising that a land reform such as the Yugoslavian one, which called for the redistribution of such a fundamental necessity as the land, kindled deep-seated "col-



lective traumas” due precisely to the way it was implemented. To this day, after several generations, these are “traumas” that in areas chiefly geared to agriculture continue to reinforce and perpetuate reciprocal feelings of mistrust, fear, uncertainty, hostility and anger. Studies on “potentials for conflict and disorder” from a historic-anthropological perspective wishing to overcome the instantaneous and mechanistic aspects of the structural and functional approach need to consider the “dramaturgical” analysis of the “flow of events”, i.e., the “conjunctural cycle” distributed along the “longue durée”. Therefore, what Marshall Sahlins defined as the “structure of the conjuncture” must be reconstructed; in other words, how specific historical events, apparently not very significant or indeed negligible, but in the end crucially relevant, engendered dramatic changes that to this day have repercussions on the collective representations of each community and on the social relations between individuals and groups (Sahlins 1981).

If we follow the suggestion put forth by Fernand Braudel and Marshall Sahlins to take into account “long-term cycles”, we also need to consider the role played by socialism in Yugoslavia. In terms of this country’s specific interpretation of socialism, which can be traced back to Tito, the state’s recognition of ethnic differences was rather inconsistent, as well as opportunistic. This “recognition policy” permanently and ambiguously played on the difference of statute

between “nations” and “nationalities”. Due to a purely formal federalism coupled with an intentionally inert structure that ultimately failed to satisfy any ethnic group, the pre-war problems and obsessions stemming not only, but also from the land reform were carried over, becoming worse, from pre-socialism to post-socialism. Socialism never truly broke away from the past, though viewing it as a mere “freezer” of history would be a serious mistake. “Freezing theories” are inherently flawed because they underplay the dynamic processes of a society while emphasizing its static nature. Yet, if we resort to these interpretations, then we need to use the freezer metaphor. It is common knowledge that these appliances generate cold thanks to heat produced dynamically. From a contemporary point of view, in order to “manage” ethnic diversity, socialism chose strategies that were static, thus inadequate, deeply painful and, at times, deliberately counterproductive. Pre-existent tensions, rifts and conflicts were thus heightened or, at best, postponed. Finally, an analysis based on the “longue durée” shows that the “structure of the conjuncture” permanently characterized by an actual persistence of interethnic tensions in a situation of apparent political discontinuity will help reconstruct and above all understand the “logic” behind the unexpected, yet predictable outbreak of ethnic disputes in the 1990s and the persisting frictions in what used to be Yugoslavia.



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