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REFLECTIONS ON THE INTELLECTUAL TRADITION OF SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE*

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Abstract

Professor Kitromilides received the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* of the University of Bucharest after a lifelong career as a historian of Southeastern Europe. His speech briefly overviews the invention of South Eastern Europe as a political and cultural space under the influence of both Greek and Romanian thought during the XIXth and XXth centuries, emphasizing the uniqueness of this multicultural region.

Keywords: Greek heritage, intellectual tradition, Southeastern Europe, nation building, ethnicity.

This is a great moment for me, an apex crowning almost forty years of involvement and collaboration with the academic community of Romania. From the early exploratory contacts in the 1970s in connection with my doctoral research on the Enlightenment, my connection with Romania has developed into a web of close friendships extending from older colleagues to those of my own age cohort and to younger generations of students, who came to be trained by me in Athens. Through this web of human contacts and through an active interest in its history and cultural heritage, an interest which is extensively recorded in my writings, Romania has become a very important part of my intellectual biography, a kind of second homeland for me. Receiving today's award I take it to be a symbolic gesture of recognition and celebration of this bond. It is precisely because this bond is so important for me that I receive today's award with deep gratitude and with a sense of moral satisfaction I have rarely experienced. It will not be an exaggeration to assure you that these feelings will accompany me to the end of my days.

At this important moment I would like to recall the memory of a few of my Romanian friends, who are no longer with us in this life, in order to record my intellectual debt to them and to their work. They include Professors Virgil

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Cândea and Alexandru Duțu, to whose work I feel I owe a great deal in developing my own understanding of the cultural traditions of Southeastern Europe. I also remember with great affection and emotion two great ladies in the field of Greek studies in Romania, Cornelia Papacostea-Danielopolu and Olga Cicanci, both of whom I felt like older sisters and whose research on the history of Hellenism in the Romanian lands has been of inestimable value for my own work.

Today's academic ceremony coincides with the celebration yesterday, 25th of March, of Greece's national holiday, honouring the anniversary of the Greek Revolution of 1821. It is a quite appropriate coincidence, which is deeply moving for me. I have devoted my life and my academic work to the study of the period leading up to the liberation struggles of the people of Southeastern Europe, focusing in particular on the elaboration of the vision of freedom in Greek political thought. This vision was one of the major gifts of Greek culture and thought to the political tradition of this part of Europe. In my remarks today I would like to share with you some reflections on the content of this tradition.

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Epictetus, the slave Stoic philosopher of the first century of the Christian era, who taught primarily self-criticism and self-examination as the purpose of moral philosophy, advises us to always begin all intellectual projects with the visitation of names: "The beginning of wisdom is the visitation of names". This is an invitation to clarity of language and thought, which is secured, according to Epictetus, with the precise definition of the terms we use to express our ideas. I should accordingly begin my remarks by defining the terms I have used in the title: what do we mean by Southeastern Europe and what is meant by the idea of an intellectual tradition. If these terms are adequately defined as viable instruments of historical analysis we then might proceed to the next level of analysis to ask if there is such a thing as an intellectual tradition pertaining to Southeastern Europe.

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"Southeastern Europe" is a Romanian idea. Its authorship belongs to Romania's national historian, Nicolae Iorga, who could be considered, without risk of serious exaggeration, the greatest historian of this part of Europe. Iorga defined the region in tolerably precise geographical terms as the Easternmost peninsula of Southern Europe that is enclosed to the north by the Carpathian Mountains and extends southward between the Adriatic and the Black Sea deep into the Mediterranean. In Iorga's judgment calling this region "Balkans" or Balkan Peninsula was a misnomer. In his reading of the countries that made up the map of this broad area, Romania had clear affinities, geographical and

ethnographic, with Central and Eastern Europe, the regions of the South Slavs in the western part of the peninsula were oriented toward the Italian world across the Adriatic, Greece has always been a Mediterranean country. This left only Bulgaria, clustered as it is around the Balkan mountain-range, the ancient Haimos of the Greeks, as the only genuinely Balkan country. Calling the region Southeastern Europe saves historical analysis from a leveling approach that overlooks regional variation and diversity and the multiple contexts with which the study of its particular components should be connected in order to be meaningful. The deeper motivation, however, of the argument to replace "Balkans" with "Southeastern Europe" as a unit of historical, geographical and ethnological analysis was political. It had to do with the wish to make the study of the history of the region part of European history, and by extension to treat the region as Europe, not only geographically but also substantively, and thus relieve it from the perception, so long persisting in Western historiography, political thought and public attitudes as an area whose character was shaped by Asiatic despotism and thus somehow alien to the rest of the continent. This too was the top priority in Iorga's agenda in his life-long historiographical project to remove Romania from the Balkan context and to connect it with the mainstream of European history by stressing its identity as the paradigmatic Southeast European country. It is this aspect of the *problématique* of Southeastern Europe, the urge to integrate it in a European perspective of self-understanding and self-knowledge, that makes the idea relevant to our own concerns and recommends it to us today.

If we turn to the clarification and definition of the idea of an "intellectual tradition" we will appreciate that we enter a much more slippery ground, not least because in this case we do not possess an authoritative point of reference, such as the work of Nicolae Iorga in the case of the definition of Southeastern Europe, in dialogue with or in criticism of which to clarify our subject. In seeking to define the idea of an intellectual tradition we might turn to the works of the great intellectual historians, the makers of this important field of research in the human sciences, such as Arthur Lovejoy or Erich Auerbach. If we do so we will realize that although they both talk about traditions of ideas and their transformations across time, they shun from the challenging – or vain perhaps – project of elaborating a definition of what an intellectual tradition is. If such great minds did not try it perhaps we, much lesser mortals, should give up the effort altogether. We still need, nevertheless, a working definition in order to proceed. We should not forget that Epictetus is looking over our shoulders. We should proceed empirically, with humility and self-doubt as befits people who pay attention to his advice.

By the composite term intellectual tradition we could be understood to mean the flow, adaptation and transformation of sets of ideas through long periods of historical time. Such sets of ideas, to form a tradition, should be held together by certain recognizable characteristics that supply an identity to them. We hear for instance of the Christian or Jewish traditions, referring to sets of

religious ideas transmitted in a corpus of sources interpreted and reinterpreted through time; or we can talk of the Greek intellectual tradition, an idea which can be taken to refer to forms of creative expression in a specific language over, in this case, an impressively long period of time spanning three millennia; or again we used to hear, with greater frequency in the past than we do now, of the Marxist tradition, and this again refers to a corpus of sources embodying serious and important reflection in the broad fields of social and economic theory.

Can we then talk of an intellectual tradition pertaining to Southeastern Europe as a unity, a tradition of reflection, marked by certain distinct and recognizable features that supply an identity and coherence to it, as a shared kernel of the particular intellectual traditions pertaining to the individual political entities and national societies that form the component parts of the geographical region? On a certain level of analysis the response to this rather long and seemingly rhetorical – and perhaps even ostentatious – question could be negative. A critic could argue, pointing to the obvious political motivations of Iorga's arguments concerning Southeastern Europe, that this is all just an ideological construct, a form of false consciousness. Against such a view I would like to argue that there is historical substance to the idea of Southeastern Europe and one way of documenting this thesis with evidence is to turn and reflect on the intellectual tradition that connects the countries in this corner of the European continent. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that although the idea of Southeastern Europe could serve ideological agendas, depending on the readings one might bring to it, it could also provide a framework for critical reflection on the collective destinies of the region.

The idea of a Southeastern European intellectual tradition is not meant to suggest that there is one common heritage of ideas and cultural forms of expression that has been identical across the national societies that make up this part of Europe. To try to put forward such an argument would be silly and historically groundless. As it happens in the rest of Europe, variation and diversity is the rule that defines the character of cultural life. First and foremost we have the variety of languages that constitute an extensive pluralism at the basis of intellectual life: five major linguistic media, four within the broad Indo-European linguistic group (Albanian, Greek, Latin / Romanian and Slavic) and one outside it (Turkish) with many dialectical subdivisions within them, compose a linguistic infrastructure that contains a strong dynamic of cultural diversity and incompatibility. Yet upon this basis of diversity and pluralism the particular linguistic and ethno-cultural traditions of Southeastern Europe on account of a dense texture of cultural and historical encounters do in fact have a great deal in common to the extent that this shared part of their respective cultural heritage makes it possible to recognize one's identity in the other as in a mirror.

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Some of the most salient elements that make up the shared stock of Southeastern European culture and find interpretative expressions in its intellectual traditions include the following:

1. The weight of antiquity in the formation of identity and self-recognition. This is particularly true for Greeks and Romanians. In these cases the strong articulation of the ancient past, Hellenism and Latinitas respectively, with the shaping of modern cultural self-awareness makes antiquity and conceptions and attitudes toward the past a decisive component of the intellectual tradition. Bulgarian claims on the Thracian past and Albanian claims on Illyrian antiquity supply other illustrations of this aspect of the intellectual tradition of Southeastern Europe.
2. The place of the Roman Empire in the history of the region and especially the role of the Eastern Roman Empire and its culture in the formation of law, institutions and traditions of statehood forms another important complex of shared legacies, with important reflections on traditions of thought and scholarship that have developed in the countries of Southeastern Europe. The heritage of the Eastern Roman Empire and its survivals after 1453 gave rise to another particularly productive concept also due to Nicolae Iorga, the idea of *Byzance après Byzance*. This idea, since its formulation in 1935, has proved very fertile in the development of historical scholarship in Southeastern Europe.
3. Closely connected with the Roman imperial heritage, in fact inextricably linked with it, has been the dominant religious tradition of the region, Orthodox Christianity. Orthodox Christianity of course has not been the only religious tradition in Southeastern Europe. Roman Catholicism, Judaism and Islam, and also some Protestant denominations have been historic religious presences, upon which has focused the spiritual life of important sections of the population. Orthodox Christianity, however, has been by far the religion of the vast majority of the people, and especially for the peasant masses it has been, for almost two millennia in some areas and for more than a thousand years in other parts, the major source of meaning and organization of their lives. Orthodoxy's association with the Roman imperial legacy and with the legacy of Medieval statehood in Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania, and the religious art, especially architecture and painting, produced by this association has formed the major cultural heritage in the peninsula other than the remnants of the civilization of antiquity. Furthermore, the place of Orthodoxy, especially through its ecclesiastical calendar, in daily life, has made this religious tradition a central focus of symbolism, cultural reflection and artistic expression and also a

medium of mutual recognition for large masses of people throughout Southeastern Europe, regardless of ethic and linguistic background.

4. The heritage left by the Ottoman conquest and domination over the region for long centuries, from the fourteenth to the twentieth, forms another critical theme in the cultural and intellectual tradition of Southeastern Europe, especially in connection with the ways it has been perceived and recreated in historiography, literature and art. It was this part of the historical heritage of the region that supplied images and models of otherness and thus fulfilled an important function in the construction of identities.
5. The elaboration of ideas of nationhood and national identity has been a shared intellectual experience across Southeastern Europe and could be seen as the major intellectual conduit for the transition to modernity. This was an important experience of intellectual transformation for the people and various linguistic communities of Southeastern Europe and it was an experience shared by all, although its effects fundamentally involved the breakup of the most important intellectual and cultural element all these people held in common, Orthodox Christianity as an inclusive community of faith and people. Out of this breakup emerged modern political nations and their national churches, which despite the common faith developed mutual hostilities and often even engaged in war with each other. Yet nationalism, the elaboration of national identities and the interpretation of history in this light became an important and fertile source of inspiration for the modern literary and artistic imagination in all Southeast European nations. The most powerful idea that inspired these traditions was the idea of freedom, liberation from foreign yoke but also freedom of the individual, the liberation of sentiment and thought. One of the earliest visionaries of liberation, Rhigas Velestinlis, contributed both to the recognition of individual national identities and to the elaboration of a pluralist and multicultural ideal that would turn the whole of Southeastern Europe into a modern republic marked by free and equal citizenship for all individuals and by social solidarity among all cultural groups and nationalities. Although the growth of nationalism led to conflicts between individual national states in Southeastern Europe, still the shared experience of national emotion can also be a means of mutual recognition and contains the dynamic of empathy and comprehension of the feelings of others, neighbours and fellow countrymen in the broad space of Southeastern Europe. When I read the poetry of Mihai Eminescu for instance I can understand the symbolism of words and the meaning of verses and I can penetrate into the feelings the poet is trying to convey

to the reader, because I have read the poetry of Dionysios Solomos, Kostis Palamas and many other Greek lyric poets who sing freedom and attachment to the homeland and the material and spiritual experiences associated with these feelings.

6. A final component of shared intellectual experience for the people of Southeastern Europe has been the idea of Europe. This has been a distinctly modern imprint on Southeast European culture and it has supplied a model for shaping the future of the people of the region since the eighteenth century. The idea of Europe for us in this part of the old continent has symbolized and informed the aspiration of freedom, the expectation of social and cultural change and the hope of progress. Since Dositej Obradović and Adamantios Korais this idea has been an intellectual force that has informed visions of a better future and the ambition to participate in the common life of the continent as equal partners. The efforts of Greece, Romania and Bulgaria today to be fully integrated and become functional rather than dysfunctional members of the European Union represent the latest stage in this effort. From the eighteenth century to the present the idea of Europe has acted as a catalyst for the articulation of the literary traditions in individual languages and has inspired important national schools of modern painting influenced by the main trends in European art from Romanticism to Modernism and beyond. It has also formed the object of some of the most creative work in the human sciences in Southeastern Europe. Of the many examples that could be mentioned I single out the work of the late Professor Alexandru Duțu, who has been a model and a teacher for many of us in the field of Southeast European studies.

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To conclude: the shared constituents of the intellectual traditions of Southeastern Europe we have briefly surveyed above could and did function in the course of history as spring-boards of ideology, which occasionally took extreme and destructive forms. They can also form the object of critical reflection and self-examination for the societies and intellectual communities concerned. This possibility is always present and its exercise can nurture a dynamic of katharsis and transcendence of the destructiveness of ideology and of the illusions and fallacies that ideology encourages. The possibility of critical thinking and the serious and sincere, not opportunistic, pursuit of reappraisals in the evaluation and interpretation of our intellectual heritage is the best hope we can have for the future of our societies and for our common future in Southeastern Europe.