1. CROAT ORIGINS IN THE CROATIAN IMAGINATION

*The significance of Slav migrations for the development of South Slav national discourses*

Ethnicity is an important tool for the self-definition of social groups. True, ethnicities in the present and past are ‘imagined communities’, they are subjective, contextual and transform perpetually. However, modern ethnicities, nations and nationalisms are not constructed out of nothing; they were not simply a ‘toxic waste’ as Geary, for example, observed in more recent times, in relation to early medieval identities.\(^1\) Understanding the role and significance of ethnic identities in Southeastern Europe requires us to see them in their historical and political contexts, or else we are in danger of falling into Orientalising, or even more properly defined ‘Balkanising’, discourse, which describes all inhabitants of the ‘Balkans’ as a specific kind of ‘transitional Other’, between the West and the ‘Orient’. Attempts to apply frameworks which fit Western European historical development, cultural, political and social values on Southeastern and Eastern Europe are failing to give more insightful picture of the past. Southeastern European identities cannot be observed through western cultural values, as they challenge both systems of constructed values, ‘Western’ and ‘Oriental’, existing in the third space in-between them; marginalised and defined through the Western colonial discourse as the ‘Balkans’.\(^2\)

Eastern and Southeastern Europe survived difficult and traumatic times during the 1990s, and the disintegration of the communist bloc caused a rethinking, restructuring and reinvention of ethnicities in the region. The postmodern era signalled the end of the modernistic ‘multiethnic’ state-constructs, such as Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. They either disintegrated, or in the case of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, a dysfunctional, essentially stillborn state was constructed by the Western-imposed Dayton peace accord of 1995, after three years of armed conflict. The rise of ethnicities and

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\(^1\) See the well placed criticism of Hutchinson 2004; 2005.

their prominence does not affect only the former Eastern Europe, Western Europe is also increasingly aware of its minorities, especially the newly constructed identities of migrant groups and the first generation of migrants who rejected assimilation into their host’s cultural and identity patterns, and choose to live in-between cultural templates of their birth-country and the imagined diasporic interpretation of parental culture.3

The construction of ethnicities, known today as the South Slavs, is strongly based upon the interpretations and perceptions of the past; the Croatian sense of identity is no different in that regard. The imaginary constructs of the past are transformed into realities of the present, influencing the ways in which modern ethnicities in the region relate to themselves and perceive others around them. While acknowledging this important and essentially positive fact which distinguishes the construction of the most Eastern and Southeastern European ethnicities from the construction of some, especially non-European based, western identities (United States, Canada, Australia), it should be said that these views of the past are easily manipulated in the present, and that the present has too frequently determined the way in which the past has been seen. Subjective interpretations of history are frequently used to justify present pretensions towards the space used by the ‘Other’, or for assimilating the identities of the ‘Other’.4 The same identity-label in different situation is having different meaning. For example, today the label ‘Bosnian’ for Croatians from Bosnia and Herzegovina would be perceived as neutral and descriptive, implying regional identity, when used by the other Croatians. However, the ethnic label ‘Bosnian’ or ‘Bosnian-Catholic’, attached to self-defined Croatians from Bosnia and Herzegovina by Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) or Bosnian nationalists, would be perceived as offensive, as it implies forceful assimilation and the denial of group identity. A similar perception of identities, according to the situation, appears amongst other identities in that region. The positivist view of history and peoples as unchangeable units is indeed something nationalists might draw upon to justify their pretensions on space, or claim to be threatened by their neighbours. The interpretation of the past was used in political purposes legitimating the needs of the present, and continues

3 E.g. Tribalat 1995; Baumann 1996; Pauly 2004 etc.
4 See Madgeary 2008.