2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE SCHOLARSHIP

Postmodernism, identity, history

The postmodern interpretation of history is slowly becoming the foundation stone of the wider scholarly consensus in the research of past societies. Therefore, it is important to briefly restate the core elements of their methodological frameworks. In short, the new interpretations, also known as postmodern, and in a narrower sense, poststructuralist, have tried to recognise and dismantle the layers and structures of the existing discourses and metanarratives (political, cultural, ideological, etc.) that have impacted on the earlier historical interpretation and view of the past. Its most significant feature is that all the sources must be re-examined, focusing on the context in which they were created. The remains of material culture should be interpreted through the social contexts in which they existed, and the written sources are seen not only as sources that reported events from the past, but also as personal narratives, products of the cultural and political discourses of their times, as literary works that followed the conventions of their genre, and sometimes reflect the discursive/political/cultural background of the author and his cultural stereotypes rather than historical ‘truth’, or fragments of the historical ‘truth’.

“General studies of individual historians tend to emphasize the 'construction' that the historian engages in while narrating his version of the past rather than on the past reality that the history is supposed to represent: in other words, Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is studied for what it tells us of the author's own view of the conflict, and of the preconceptions shared by him and his audience, rather than for what it tells us of the actual historical circumstances of the years 431 to 411: his text is a Peloponnesian War rather than the Peloponnesian War.”

Postmodernism as an archaeological-historical interpretation of the past has been impacted on by several different conceptual approaches, which will be briefly mentioned and discussed here. The socio-anthropological instrumentalism and interactionism of F. Barth is especially influential. It maintains that ethnic identity is formed

1 Marincola 2007: 3.
through the interaction of different groups, and that ethnicity can be transformed and manipulated as a kind of social and political instrument, rather than being an already predetermined, reified identity. “The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses.”

Thus, we can say that ethnicity is formed through the internal self-definition of the group, but also through the influence of the external observer, especially if the external observer is in a position of political or cultural-discursive dominance. In fact, it is possible to say that the construction of ethnic identity and culture is the result of both structure and agency, as ethnic groups construct their self-definition, but also manipulate culture and tradition for their common interests. Yet the construction of ethnicity is also impacted by external social, economic, and political processes in which the ethnic groups exist. The consequence of these approaches is that ethnic groups cannot be seen any more as reified, phenotypical, biologically determined social formations, but as a certain aspect of the ‘imagined communities’, as Anderson called the modern nations in his influential book, which constantly transformed their identity according to the different historical and political circumstances in which they existed.

‘Orientalism’ and postcolonial criticism hold a special place in these new concepts. ‘Orientalism’ is, in short, a discursive perception of the cultural ‘Other’ that, through the accumulation of different cultural stereotypes, perceived the ‘Other’ as a pseudo-objective reality by the outsider. In many ways, the perception of the ‘Other’ as a group term plays a role in the self-definition of the one who is defining it, i.e. ‘Us’, as it emphasises that the ‘They’ represents everything ‘We’ are not. ‘Orientalism’ is also closely linked to the relationship of political power and discourse between those who dominate and those who are dominated, as for example between European colonisers and their colonies.

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2 Barth 1969, quote from 15. Cf. the more recent interpretation of Barth’s views in Vermeulen and Govers 1994, and Barth’s own discussions on culture as an abstraction of reality, which have shaken the homogeneity of his earlier ‘Us’ and ‘Them’, Barth 1989.

3 R. Jenkins 1994, expanded in R. Jenkins 1997. Literature on ethnicity is too extensive to be mentioned here, see an overview in Banks 1996.


5 Anderson 1983, see also the fierce attack on the view of ethnicity as primordial and predetermined in Eller and Coughlin 1993.