Cultural Models in the Southeast European Enlightenment

The rise of modern states in Southeastern Europe has insistently called historians' attention to different aspects of evolving political institutions and diplomatic relations. But, only recently have transformations of mental structures been considered in order to elucidate completely an epoch in which new fields of intellectual activity were discovered and traditional conceptual schema modified. The tendency to label a whole phase of civilization after analyzing a single set of data indicate how rapidly partial research reached its limits; this tendency provoked the rise of intellectual history, which then claimed the right to contribute "to the organization and understanding of history as a whole."\(^1\)

Toward the end of this phase, new social groups in all societies of Southeastern Europe conceived new cultural forms which resembled Western ones and differed from those which had predominated in past centuries. But does this major aspect entitle scholars to designate the whole modern period as a phase of "Westernization" in which the imitation of Western models helped people to emerge from an "intellectual backwater"? No doubt, interest in social and political problems increased, and new solutions were reached via examples provided by expanding Western cultures. But it is also evident that these profound and various transformations do not fit into a simplistic and partial scheme in which adoption of new forms depends on the rejection of old ones. Such a scheme excessively simplifies the very substance of European culture and favors the appearance of abstract formulas which disregard human thoughts and feelings. The Western Enlightenment did not suddenly cover a flat and colorless map in the way one spreads butter on bread. If we accept the notion that "men are not made by the age in which they live but, as far as cultural history is concerned, they make it," then we should also agree that one can see "how one can be influenced by an idea, either influenced in its favor or against it; but how one can be influenced by a time is too mysterious to be treated rationally."\(^2\)

On the basis of such a conceptual scheme, the study of Southeast European culture divides into "modern" and "old" art and literature; the principal interest of interpreters was limited for a long time to philological aspects found in old texts.

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and in the analysis of ways in which “European art” replaced Byzantine painting. The progress made in publishing great bibliographical repertories of books and periodicals as well as penetrating studies, which posited works of art in their social setting, offered new starting points to historians who began questioning ideas that dominated earlier interpretations of the Enlightenment. Contemporary studies show the changes in approach to cultural history. Starting from the body of intellectual and imaginative works in which human thought and experience of this period are recorded, recent interpretations focus on the mental attitudes which explain the transformation of old forms into new ones. This transformation covers different periods in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the Greek and Romanian enlightenments climaxed by the end of the eighteenth century, the Albanian one started later. The Enlightenment did not stem from the same way of thinking and acting; and there are major differences between the Yugoslav and Ottoman enlightenments. The historian must consider the political conditions of the people of Southeastern Europe and also the different cultural traditions which were neither uprooted nor even interrupted, but were directed toward new objectives.

In order to avoid the study of intellectual phenomena in isolation and to consider fully their complexity, the historian may specially emphasize the mental attitudes which reveal specific mental cues to concrete experience and give priority to collective images which explain men’s options—such as: society’s image of its own past, people’s image of the real world (in our case, Europe), and the image of future cultural developments. All three of these images may be detected in the documentary material now made available by literary and art historians.3

In each Southeast European culture the past was absorbed into a selective tradition4 which emphasized certain historical moments, certain earlier writings, and certain memorials which, when taken together, demonstrated the legitimacy of new aspirations. However, the “Golden Age” or moment of irrefutable Truth appeared differently to Ottomans who were bound to their religious world view, to Greeks who gave new dimensions to the Hellenic world, to Paisi of Khilandar who wrote a history of the Slavs, or to Romanians who evoked Trajan’s campaigns in Dacia. Attachment to this image of the past was much stronger in cultures which had been slower to develop writing. The Enlightenment thus assumed different meanings—such as, a “renaissance” or an “awakening.”

Answers to the question “Where is the center of the world?” were not the same; some thinkers looked to Mecca, others to the city built by Constantine the Great, others to Rome. Whenever these centers were considered to be flourishing, interest
