

Racism, Islamophobia and Decoloniality on the Balkans. Interview with Piro Rexhepi

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Piro Rexhepi is a researcher who works on decoloniality, sexuality and Islam. Earlier this year, his “White Enclosures. Racial Capitalism and Coloniality Along the Balkan Route” (2023) was published with Duke University Press. Neda Genova from dVERSIA’s collective talked to Rexhepi about some of the motivations and main ideas behind the book.

Neda Genova: Could you start by introducing the book to readers who might not have yet read it? Perhaps you can share some of your motivations behind this research, how it all started?

Piro Rexhepi: The book comes out of years of disappointment with what has been written about the Balkans, and the kind of issues and histories that are written out of the region. When you develop an interest in regional politics, as opposed to the various politics of specific nation states, you come across all these connected but silenced and absented histories – if and when they are mentioned, they are mentioned passingly. That was one part of it.

The other part was that I was frustrated with the area studies dominance over the region, and various local collaborators, who had forwarded a very particular understanding of what is happening in the ‘Balkans’ and what the Balkans are. I found it odd that Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans* was the supposed critical canon when in fact it reproduced and normalised problematic approaches to the Balkans because it clouded over the issues that she was intentionally silencing. By this I don’t even mean her own family history of her father being a member of the committee that designed the assimilation policies in Bulgaria*, and her co-authoring articles with her father in the 1990s, which is telling of where she comes from. Putting even that aside, I just found that book – which I already had to read in graduate classes – very limited in terms of what it was doing, and the ways in which it was weaving a supposedly critical history of the region. She actually attaches the region to Eurocentric spatial and temporal frameworks, erasing Roma and Muslim histories in favour of some supposed ‘concrete Europeaness and Christianess’ that she, like her father, believed to be the corner stones of Balkans European belonging.

And then Todorova wasn’t alone. Of course, in the 90s and 2000s, there was an array of knowledge production by area studies scholars. I am thinking here also of Kristen Ghodsee, who worked on Muslim lives in Eastern Europe and mainly based her research in Bulgaria by reproducing Islamophobic and orientalist tropes at the height of the globalization of Islamophobia where interest on the Balkan borderland Muslims in the US and EU in the larger context of the war on terror became a profitable undertaking. From today’s point of view, this is an amazing kind of extractivism in which Western academics made careers on the backs of racialised communities by making them responsible for the structural and systematic violence they were experiencing – just as European and American anthropologists ‘studied’ Balkan Muslims if they were fit to be trusted in the European integration project, or if they were a danger considering their supposed post-Cold war affiliation with ‘Arab Islam.’

My goal with the book was also to tell the histories of communities that don't exist in the imagination of above mentioned scholars. I was doing work with primarily queer and trans* communities, in part because I was an LGBTQ activist myself in the 90s. What I started noticing is how, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was the tendency to pit Muslim communities against LGBTQ communities in Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia. This got me interested in how Muslim communities were targeted for a very particular kind of disciplinary Europeanising project - one that sought to pinkwash islamophobia by producing a Europhile homonationalism in the region. It operated both on a discursive level but also on a civil society level because of the EU funding and political capital deployed to frame dominant narratives and tunes. Local NGOs have to play to them if they want some of that funding.

So, these were some of the histories that motivated me to think regionally as opposed to reproducing the 'national' frames of reference. What happens when you start to look at the region, is that you start seeing patterns that don't fold into the national boundaries. One pattern that becomes obvious is that for almost all Balkan nation states dealing with their Muslim and Roma populations and their Ottoman past becomes the beginning of the creation of racialized regional hierarchies. This is not to say that racialized or other hierarchies didn't exist before, because sometimes people mistake that critique. But rather that with the establishment of post-Ottoman nation states, you start having a modernised and institutionalised hierarchical racial and gendered order, because you have the beginning of the modern biopolitical management of populations: from its registration of the population to the changing and transformation of spatial and social relations; urbanisation; industrialization; sanitation and so forth. This creates more structural socio-economic racialized categories.

The other thing I was noticing was how, increasingly, Eastern European academics in the West started to talk about their racialization in Western Europe, without necessarily addressing that, frequently, the social groups that they came from were generally in positions of power. This always interested me because it seemed as if, when they left Serbia or Bulgaria, they immediately became victims, but they wouldn't address their position of power in their own societies. I think this is very important for epistemic justice because it relativized power relations in knowledge production infrastructures to which Roma people for instance are not given access. Or, if they are, it is only as tokens to legitimize the various claims that a local gadjo academic is making in relation to Roma populations in the Balkans. Same goes for queer and trans* communities. I want to stress the important work that Jelena Savić is doing on gadjo supremacy that should be on the radar of everyone working on the region.

These are some of the issues I wanted to address in the book. I also wanted to address the absence of the critique of coloniality and modernity and how it had an impact on the region. This is not to say that other people hadn't done this, because Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler had already thought of how Eastern European states have become subsidiaries of Western European colonial expansion and modernity. However, I wanted to look further south in the Balkans. I also feel that after the 1990s - the war in Bosnia and Kosovo, but also the expulsion of Muslim populations from Bulgaria - Muslim communities had become almost afraid to talk about these issues - or if they did, it was done in a very apologetic manner. I found that disturbing too and wanted to talk about it as well. Think for instance how Alexander Vučić, the current Serbian President was a minister of information in the Milošević government during the genocide on Bosnian people and Serbia's colonial war on Kosovo: that both Bosnia and Kosovo have to deal with the same Serbian state tells you how relativised discourses of 'inter-ethnic' violence and 'we all suffered' legitimized and normalised a reality where victims are accused of nationalism while nationalists are being legitimized as supposed victims. Same in Bulgaria where Roma communities are blamed for their own structural, historical and systematic violence which they continue to experience as if it were their own fault. And is not just the right-

wing that promotes this narrative but centre and left – if we can even talk about political ‘differences’ when it comes to racism and Islamophobia in the Balkans.

Those are some of the reasons behind why it is hard for me to describe the book in short: because there have been so many layers and layers of area studies, hegemonic ordering of what can and cannot be discussed and how, what issues get to be raised and by whom. So when you actually try to talk beyond that – not even to be in dialogue with it, but to just ignore it altogether – you end up coming across issues that we are not used to thinking about as being in tension with each other. People will ask me, “What do you mean, you are working on the Muslim community of Bosnia, but you are also working on Azis, in Bulgaria?” – Well, yes, that is what’s happening there. These are communities that live together; these are not different planets, they are adjacent to each other. It is as if they can’t believe that a Muslim in Bosnia and Macedonia listens to Azis, you know? These fragmented academic narratives are usually a product of Eurocentric disciplinary divisions that zoom in on one particular issue and ignore everything around it at the expense of some supposed ‘deep’ diving.

I wanted to question those very strict disciplinary categorizations that had become normalised in the region. I think that the difficult part of framing all this was that I had to find an overarching framework that can thread all these things together. One thing that crystallised as I was doing my research was that what was giving potency to all these narratives of whiteness and European belonging was the geopolitical b/ordering of the European Union and the intensification of border regimes in the Balkans. This is because the EU sees the Balkans as a security bordering zone, a weak link in the fortification of its racial borders but also because of the large local populations of racial others who don’t meet the categories of white, Christian/secular Europeans and whose integration within the fortes is constantly questioned.

The Balkans is a weak link for them for many reasons. It is a weak link, because its population is not majority white, like it would be, let’s say, in Central Europe – in Poland or the Baltic states. There is clearly a division in their racial reading of the world. The Balkans become very murky waters for them and so I realised that the pressure for creating a discourse of political, economic, but also a real material border, around the Balkan route, was central. You can see this in how the refugee populations were allowed relative freedom of movement in the region and then after the 2015-2018 European-induced ‘refugee crisis’, you started seeing the mushrooming of camps and carceral spaces sponsored by the EU to control the arrival of refugees escaping the Syrian war. The very fact that we did not see the same response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis illustrates best the racial and religious character of the EU border.

The re-emergence of the far right is also part and parcel of that. Maybe I am extending beyond the initial question now, but the last thing that I want to say is that it was also a response to how the rise of the far-right in Eastern Europe was framed as supposedly ‘Eurosceptic’ and ‘illiberal’ (whatever that means). This can be seen as just another effort to reproduce the EU as an innocent liberal order under threat by the far-right – when in fact EU border policies exceed far-right expectations. In this sense, right-wing and far-right political formations in Eastern Europe are not Eurosceptics in any shape of the imagination. These are people committed to the European Union project because it fulfils their fantasy of a white global gated community and global white supremacy. Like when people use to claim that Boyko Borissov was a Eurosceptic! But what is Eurosceptic about him? What is Eurosceptic about any of these people in the region? Absolutely nothing. If anything, membership in the EU has bolstered their political leverage and has emboldened and solidified their hold on power. Same with Vučić in Serbia. Today even more so, because the EU is now willing to overlook its once supposed ‘emancipatory’ project of ‘Euro-Atlantic integration’ which included all sorts of European abstractions like ‘rule of law’ ‘free market economy reforms’ and ‘anti-corruption’ – all that empty talk is now replaced with: as long as you are protecting your borders and can

manage your local racial others, you have free rein what you're doing inside.

Neda: For me, it is both a political and a methodological question of how do you approach these histories and narratives, and the different layers of racialization and dispossession of communities. What is very clear in the book is that the stakes are very evident - the concern for liberation for overcoming hetero-patriarchy and racism - it is very clear that these are the driving forces behind this work. So it is not just an academic exercise or about applying some kind of theoretical framework in order to carve out a theoretical niche.

Piro: It has to be like this because when you work with migrants, Roma, Muslim and queer and trans* communities, if you are not making the violence that they are facing central to your work, then you are just doing academic critique and reproducing racism.

Neda: Yes, it is very evident. You already started talking about the motivations behind considering these different contexts not as separate but of tracing the continuities between processes of racialisation in different countries. You also explicitly frame this theoretically in terms of regimes of coloniality, which is not necessarily a very established way of looking at such processes in the Balkans. So maybe you would like to say something about that? What does a decolonial framework allow you to do?

Piro: I was saying that part of the goal was to disrupt the spatial and temporal frameworks of how we study the region. Eurocentric discontinuities and periodizations are in service of colonial regimes of power. What is post-colonialism? What is post-socialism? These are all periodizations that suggest that we are beyond colonialism or socialism. And so, if we say 'post-colonialism', this is a political statement, because from a Western perspective it assumes that colonialism is over, all the former colonies have become 'independent' nation-states and therefore we can't speak about colonialism anymore. This presupposes that there has been some supposed break between colonial Europe and post-colonial European Union as Fatima El-Tayeb brilliantly points out. Or similarly, with post-socialism: socialism is over, the West won the Cold War, this is the 'end of history' and so forth. These are all very particular periodizations of knowledge production and organized temporalities as a political project not as some neutral harmless periodizations. When you stick yourself into one of them, it becomes impossible to see the larger picture, in part because usually you are asked to dig deep within that particular category and avoid the legacies, entailments, connections and references to the past by focusing on the 'post'.

So, if you want to study post-socialist Eastern Europe, you are generally studying labour relations, free market economy reforms, corruption, rule of law, Europeanization and similar issues generated by EU policy 'concerns'. Since the EU has many 'concerns', as you know. The *longue durée* issues that move from one regime, from one period to another, become completely invisibilized.

Decoloniality does away with these periodisations because it sees them for what they are: Eurocentric frameworks for re-enforcing a very Eurocentric perspective on the world and politics as supposedly normal and neutral. We can speak all day long of 'post-colonialism' and 'post-socialism', but the reality is that for the last five centuries we have lived in a socio-economic and political regime that was highly influenced by modernity, capitalism and coloniality. And there was no part of the world that was left untouched by these forces. The Balkans was no exception. If we ignore that, we run the risk of producing some sort of Balkan exceptionalism and ignore how racism, capitalism and coloniality have shaped modern institutions, populations, states and subjectivities.

I think decoloniality - or the critique of coloniality, racial capitalism and modernity as co-constitutive processes - allows us to consider the broader and longer histories of violence beyond narrow

periodizations. The other reason why I think with continuities as opposed to discontinuities, is because very little has changed in the experiences of colonized communities overall in their political position vis-à-vis power.

Let me put it differently: what would the history of the region look like if that history was read from the perspective of subaltern communities, or the undercommons, or the '*raja*' - to use a regional Ottoman term? Obviously, these discontinuities would make no sense. Or if they did, they would only be marked as something that the gadjó was freaking out about, like "Oh, socialism is over", or "Oh, we feel so bad that socialism is over". You can find traces of those discourses because political ruptures do exist, and they are significant. But in the grand scheme of things in the last century, these continuities of racism, in particular, have been so deeply stratified and normalised in nation states that no regime has dealt with them significantly, or even marginally. In other words, socialism did not address the question of racism on Roma communities, nor did it question how its supposed neutral secularism paved the way for the structural violence on Muslim communities - as was the case here in Bulgaria where Muslims were converted into Bulgarians and given Christian names under socialism against their will.

The problem, of course, is that when you think about coloniality and modernity, because the critique comes from Latin America, people usually say: "Well, it is a Latin American critique". Yes, but coloniality and modernity didn't just happen in Latin America, they happened all over the world. This is another sort of racist trope. In the Balkans, they would say, "Oh, this is from Latin America", or "This is from the US." Where did you get your Marx from? I mean, I don't know that Karl Marx or Max Weber were from the Balkans but it is hard to find a published paper in the region that doesn't make reference to them. This is because European thinkers are considered universal and those from the Global South - particular. What becomes acceptable and what gets rejected is part and parcel of racial hierarchies within academic knowledge production of white western canons. One can use Marx or one can use Mark Fisher to legitimise herself/themselves. But you can't use Ruth Gilmore or Maria Lugones for instance, because they are Black scholars from America or from Latin America. Who decides which references can and can't be used and what categories we use to study the Balkans is always very interesting to me because you will almost always be able to spot the racist in the room - disguised as a Marxist, liberal, or just a good old nationalist.

Neda: In your book, there is, on the one hand, this focus on continuities, which we just discussed: not just in spatial, geographical and political sense, but also in a temporal sense: for instance when you consider the continuities between pre-socialist, socialist and post socialist regimes of coloniality. But at the same time, there is also a lot of detail through an engagement with artworks, with literary production, with the music of Azis... and I think, through that kind of detailed focus, you also create a sense of richness and detailedness, which doesn't allow for the creation of a homogenising account. Because I think that this could be a potential danger when one overemphasises continuities and parallels between things - I think a common mistake is to then end up reifying these totalising narratives. What I liked a lot about the book is that there are these moments of very sustained and focused work on practices of resistance or moments of rupture. Would you like to say something about this, or about the role of your engagement with artistic practices in the book?

Piro: The word 'resistance' has become so fashionable that it could mean everything and nothing. As I moved through the Balkans during the last decade driving from Salonika to Skopje, Sofia and Sarajevo I saw genuine solidarity and care when people along the Balkan route opened their homes and mosques and came out on the streets with whatever little they had to offer it to refugees; when they came to protest violence. Of course, there were vigilante and racist groups too but I would like

to think that the majority of people in the Balkans came out in support of refugees against a pervasive, European-wide effort to depict the refugees as dangerous. Of course, some of that EU propaganda reached some people, but by and large - people provided whatever care they could along the route because they are not strangers to displacement, war and poverty but also because they are not strangers to the people that come through the Balkan Route.

I have found that people who intellectualise less about resistance, and, I would say, do more about anti-racism, poverty, queerphobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, usually are people who aren't necessarily part of the 'Marxist straight male collectives' in the region that talk abstractions all day about inequality and 'revolution' but can't be bothered to even go out in the streets. What I love about Azis is that he doesn't portray himself as some hero. I mean - of course he does in the sense that he is a queen - but it is not like he takes the time to intellectualise this. He already did that in the 90s, when they would invite him to these shows where Ivan Slavov would show up and say that Azis is not a real Bulgarian, but a product of some, you know, conspiracy to emasculate and pervert Bulgaria. And he saw it for what it was, and just went on and did his thing - which I find a lot more powerful, because it reaches a lot more people than some Balkan thinker who is plotting a Hegelian revenge somewhere in the annals of future pasts.

Of course we know popular culture becomes co-opted and commodified, and the various problems within the music industry, and all that. But it is very hard to ignore the interventions that he makes, because he knows where to touch and scratch - not just in Bulgaria, but, I think, also in the Balkans. And how to bring up very suppressed issues, especially around racism and queerphobia. I think that in Bulgaria he deals more with racism with his interventions, but broadly, in the Balkans, he has found a great way to destabilise the seemingly str8 stable Balkan machista subjectivity all the while being heard by them - that's what I find fascinating. You walk around Sofia, and you see these cis-straight buff dudes who seem like they could beat the shit out of you if they found out you are gay, but then they are listening to Azis. Those kinds of contradictions are very important to attend to, and I would say far more emancipatory. Because one thing that you come across all the time in the Balkans is the stance of "Oh, no, just ignore him, selyak" that come from secular urban elites who see everything Roma or Muslim-adjacent as a sign of backwardness. What I appreciate about Azis is that he doesn't alienate people but reminds them that things have to change.

I also deal with other cultural productions, especially from the socialist period, which haven't been critiqued enough, because there's so much nostalgia for that kind of production. You can't meet Yugoslavs without them praising Yugoslav cinema. Then you sit down with them and you watch Yugoslav cinema, and you are like, "How can you praise this"? This is mad, this is like US films from the 1950s: the woman is always inside the house, dealing with the children in the kitchen, the Albanian never says more than a word, Roma people are always trafficking children. Like recently a Macedonian friend of mine tried to convince me that "Trst-via-Skopje", a Macedonian TV series about Roma-Albanian human trafficking networks was the best that Macedonian TV had produced because "content doesn't really matter, look at the cinematography of those series - they don't make them like that anymore!" And people say "Oh, it's the great Yugoslav cinema!". Which great Yugoslav cinema are you talking about? I think these productions were very dangerous, and they still are, because while seemingly providing a critique of society, they sedimented a very racist worldview. This continues to be the case. It wasn't accidental: I think it is because during that period people were massively exposed to television. Most people in the Balkans got their television sets during the socialist period in the 70s and 80s. So these cultural productions were key in how they saw the worlds in their countries beyond their immediate circumstances.

I wanted to address that because those references are so omnipresent in all the conversations that you have with people, but also because they are usually fictionalised histories, or historical fiction that many people take for granted. Just like the movie "Time of Violence" (1988) in Bulgaria, every

state in the Balkans had one such grand piece. The Albanian version is about Skanderbeg and the Serbian is about the murder of some Serbian prince at the Battle of Kosovo. So every socialist state produced this sort of *magnum opus* of fairy-tale... but people consumed it en masse, and actually experienced it as something that was real. However, these cultural productions were very much strategic interventions by the state to create a national narrative. In that national narrative, the racial other is always the Muslim, the Roma or the homosexual. When you watch these movies as a Muslim or Roma or queer person, you can't get excited about them like others do, because you can see right through them what's going on. I wanted to address that.

A lot of the ideas in the book come from small moments of inspiration; it probably happens to you, it happens to everybody who does research. You sit in a conference, and somebody will say something, and you think, "Oh, my God, I can't..." The critical discussion of "Variola Vera" (1982) in the book comes from a conference in Belgrade. Judith Butler was there, she was giving a talk, and afterwards I was hanging out with some queer people from Belgrade. And they were like "Oh, 'Variola Vera' was so cutting edge, it was a Yugoslav 'horror' film...", and I was thinking to myself: "Are they talking about the same film that I have seen?". In addressing them, I also wanted to address the discrepancies in the various experiences that people have with the socialist pasts, but also the cultural productions of the socialist pasts. And how only one narrative has managed to surface. This is in part because there has been this binarism, where you are either nostalgic about socialism, or you are a reactionary far-right. To me this never made sense, because I never saw myself in any of those extremes, because I wasn't invested in these political projects. I wasn't asked to, you know, I was just read over.

Neda: You just touched upon something that I wanted to ask you about anyway, which is this question of nostalgia. I was wondering about some of the claims that you make about the existence of a post-socialist nostalgia towards an allegedly 'color-blind' or anti-racist socialist regime. I must say that I would struggle to find examples of such approaches in Bulgaria today, would you say it's a sentiment that is more popular in former Yugoslavia? And also, if it is such a widespread way of thinking about the socialist past, do you think that this nostalgia for a decolonial and anti-racist past can be used as a resource in the present? Speaking as a Bulgarian, it seems a better position to start from...

Piro: I think it was more explicit in post-Yugoslav spaces, in part because of the attention that Svetlana Boym gave to Yugostalgia. For whatever reason, she zoomed in on Yugoslavia, and gave Yugo-nostalgia such a big boost in academia. But I don't think that Yugoslavs are the only ones who are nostalgic, I think it exists throughout the post-socialist world.

However, I am not necessarily talking about the explicit forms of nostalgia, but about the nuanced versions of nostalgia: the treatment of the past as the time when things were more reasonable, even if undemocratic, and frequently violent. I have nothing against people studying the socialist past, but I just don't think that there are enough critical lines when they do so. Again, it goes back to that extreme between people who study the socialist past as the ultimate authoritarian past, and then you have people who study the socialist past to find something redeemable. What I am trying to say is that there is nothing that would interest me about the socialist past that doesn't speak about what that regime did to particular sections of the population: women, minorities, religious communities, queer communities. When people do research on the past, and fail to acknowledge this, for me, it is like zooming in on the European Union today and saying: "gays have so many rights in the European Union" but have nothing to say about how that same union literally murdered 500 people yesterday on the Mediterranean.

I think that there needs to be a more robust engagement with positionality and reflexivity in the region, and we don't do that. We do that when we go to the West. When we go to the West, we

immediately have to think about where we are positioning ourselves in the currents of power. Because, whether we want to or not, we are foreign there. But we don't necessarily do enough of that work at home, we somehow think of it only in the process of migration.

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