

Framing the Balkans: Everyday Life Beyond Stereotypes

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Abstract:

The continuous conceptualization of the Balkans as the Other next door to Europe and the persisting tensions in the identities of the peoples inhabiting the area are recurring themes that mark the academic work about this region. *Everyday life in the Balkans*, edited by David W. Montgomery, a contribution to a subfield that has been neglected for many decades, offers a wide range of topics and views that shed light into how the average Balkan person deals with art, culture, politics, religion, history, livelihood, shifting identities, and neighborly relations in daily life. Covering all the countries of the region, the authors offer insights into what changes the area has undergone in the last decades, including post-socialist and post-war periods, but also keeping an eye on how the past events connect with the modern dynamics of everyday life in the peninsula.

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Montgomery, David W.: *Everyday Life in the Balkans*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019. 448 pages, 42 USD. ISBN: 978-0-253-03820-3.

Abstract:

The continuous conceptualization of the Balkans as the Other next door to Europe and the persisting tensions in the identities of the peoples inhabiting the area are recurring themes that mark the academic work about this region. *Everyday life in the Balkans*, edited by David W. Montgomery, a contribution to a subfield that has been neglected for many decades, offers a wide range of topics and views that shed light into how the average Balkan person deals with art, culture, politics, religion, history, livelihood, shifting identities, and neighborly relations in daily life. Covering all the countries of the region, the authors offer insights into what changes the area has undergone in the last decades, including post-socialist and post-war periods, but also keeping an eye on how the past events connect with the modern dynamics of everyday life in the peninsula.

In *Everyday life in the Balkans*, David W. Montgomery collaborates with 33 prominent scholars, including anthropologists, literary scholars, writers, poets, etc. to explore the different political, economic, and cultural transformations that the Balkans has experienced in the recent decades of the post-socialist and post-war era. With an eye on deconstructing stereotypes stemming from what Maria Todorova has labeled as Balkanism, which allegorizes the Other next door to Europe, this volume offers invaluable insights into how the people of the Balkans construct their daily life in terms of art, religion, history, and ethnic relations.

The first section deals with several historical aspects of everyday life in the Balkans, especially how contemporary daily life connects with past events. Covering periods such as the Middle Ages, the late Ottoman Empire, the Yugoslav era, and the 1990s, the chapters of this section are a contribution to viewing the Balkans from a historical perspective and to considering what has survived from the past that is important in the everyday life of the present.

The second section focuses on what makes a home in the modern day Balkans, where ethnic tensions and ensuing difficulties following the many wars and crises in the region have prompted the deployment of variegated strategies to cope with their aftermath. This section conceptualizes home more in the sense of feeling at home, while some of the contributions focus on how feminism, the LGBTQ movement, and younger generations strive to make a home in the Balkans. For example, Monika Palmberger explores how young people in the city of Mostar deal with the ethnic Croat-Bosniak division that, after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, extended beyond economy, politics, and culture to encompass health-care, education, and media. Palmberger concludes that the generation born during the war actively engages both in alienating themselves from war legacy and against the stigmatization from older generations.

“The Livelihoods of Everyday Life,” the third section, builds on the notion of home, but explores what people do in their daily life and how this *doing* influences the way they construct life. In his chapter, Daniel M. Knight looks at how the Greek economic crisis triggered collective memories from the past in relation to identity and pushed people in the area of Trikala to rethink identification with the Balkans and to question their belonging to Western Europe. The author concludes that, in times of suffering and poverty, everyday life in Greece is fully understood only through the lens of how Greeks relate with their Balkan memories and culture (p. 195). One of the main themes in travel literature or fiction about the Balkans is the essentialist representation of Balkan peoples. In his contribution, Andrea Matošević challenges the notion of an essentialized Balkan masculinity and offers – through an ethnographic approach in a Croatian shipyard – a nuanced view of how masculinity comes into effect due to different contextual conditions, not as an essence of the Balkan male. This view is compared to several cinematographic productions and travel writings, such as Emir Kusturica’s film *Underground*, that, according to the reading of the author perpetuate an essentialized Balkan masculinity (p. 184).

The chapters of the fourth section deal with political discourses and how the latter are influenced by the daily concerns and struggles of the average people and how everyday life is recursively shaped by the political elites. Ilká Thiessen analyzes how the right-wing government rebuilding project known as ‘Skopje 2014’ in the Macedonian capital has reconstructed the visual landscape of the city but also how newly-erected statues are used to impose nationalist views and agendas on the locals, forcing them to think hard about how to become Macedonians. While contending that the project in question aims to rewrite both the Ottoman and Yugoslav history of the city, the author claims that it also excludes Albanians and Roma minorities from becoming more European and Christian, implying that this is an exclusive right only of the Macedonian majority.

The reemergence of the increasing role of religion in daily life in the post-1990s has been an enduring feature of recent Balkan history and of the scholarly works on the Balkans. As such, it is not a surprise that religious tolerance and neighborliness, moral behaviors and identity, individualized religious experience in relation to collectivist forms of religious identity, religious festivals and their impact on identity, give shape to the section entitled “The Religion(s) of Everyday Life.”

Frances Trix, in her chapter about Ramadan in the multi-ethnic Kosovan city of Prizren, deals with the question of how Prizren retained its traditional appearance while other cities in Kosovo have lost it in the last decades. Trix analyzes what strategies Prizren Muslims use in this period of the year to discipline and reinforce their Muslim identity and how they cope with the traumas of the recent Kosovo war. In her contribution in the same section, Milica Bakić-Hayden explores the transformation of religious practices in post-socialist Serbian society through the prism of *Slava*, a religious feast that honors the patron saint of the family. Contending that *Slava* combines pagan and Christian elements, Bakić-Hayden claims that this feast fuses religious and ethnonational identities while treating them as interchangeable (p. 290). *Slava* affirms both ethno-nationalism and Christian Orthodoxy, concludes the author. In her chapter regarding inter-religious relations in contemporary Bulgaria, Magdalena Lubanska offers a glimpse into how Orthodox Christians and Muslims rely on *komshuluk*, or good neighborly relations, to tackle their everyday life and what dynamics underlie this strategy of coexistence.

The chapters of the sixth section, “The Art of Everyday Life,” deal with aesthetics and creativity and their effects on everyday life. In her “Mothers in Balkan Film,” Yana Hashamova analyzes three films to explore how the conceptualizations of motherhood in different socialist, post-socialist, and post-war Balkan contexts have changed in relation to the figure of mother in folklore. The sacrificial mother of the folklore, with strong exotic and stereotypical nuances, exemplified in the Albanian tale that Marguerite Yourcenar includes in her short story ‘The Milk of Death,’ is contrasted with triumphs and tragedies of modern Balkan mothers in three contemporary cinematographic productions, in which women assert agency and voice in motherhood. In contradistinction to folklore images, social resilience and emotional intelligence pervade the three movies, concludes Hashamova.

In his chapter, poet and literary scholar Ervin Hatibi explores how censorship in communist Albania controlled literary works, both local productions and translations, aiming to scrutinize the traffic of themes on love, religion, and politics. In this tellingly entitled contribution “Memories of Foreign Love,” Hatibi argues that literary themes on love and sexuality became one of the unsurmountable borders in isolated communist Albania. The transgressing of this border started quietly in the everyday

life of the last years of dictatorship, contends Hatibi, while concluding that the successive exploration of sexuality became one of the defining themes of Albanian contemporary literature.

Combining a range of leading academic voices on the Balkans, both local and international, this volume is a fundamental contribution to understanding how the different Balkan peoples negotiate and situate their relations with their past, present, and future concerns and vicissitudes. What makes *Everyday Life in the Balkans* a fascinating read is that it combines fieldwork with analyses of representations, something that gives this volume a special status among the many contributions on the region. While exploring how the Balkan people deal with everyday struggles and how they negotiate their identities, histories, cultures, and religions, this volume is a must-read for the experts on the Balkans. Challenging many old notions about the Balkans in general, this fascinating volume achieves one of its main goals: undoing stereotypes through insights into daily interactions in the post-socialist and post-war Balkans.

German Abstract:

Den Balkan gestalten: Alltag jenseits von Stereotypen

Die kontinuierliche Konzeptualisierung des Balkans als das Andere neben Europa und die anhaltenden Spannungen in der Identität der in der Region lebenden Völker sind ein wiederkehrendes Thema, das die wissenschaftliche Arbeit über diese Region kennzeichnet. *Everyday life in the Balkans*, herausgegeben von David W. Montgomery, ein Beitrag zu einem seit Jahrzehnten vernachlässigten Teilgebiet, bietet eine breite Palette von Themen und Ansichten, die Aufschluss darüber geben, wie der durchschnittliche Balkan mit Kunst, Kultur und Politik umgeht und behandelt Religion, Geschichte, Lebensunterhalt, Identitätswandel und nachbarschaftliche Beziehungen im täglichen Leben. Die Autoren decken alle Länder der Region ab und bieten Einblicke in die Veränderungen in den letzten Jahrzehnten, einschließlich der Zeit nach dem Sozialismus und nach dem Krieg, aber auch in die Zusammenhänge der vergangenen Ereignisse mit der modernen Dynamik von Alltag auf der Halbinsel.

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