

When Academia Met Politics: The Balkans' Imagology

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Abstract:

The historical textbook *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* isn't just another book on the popular stereotypical discourse about the Balkans. Rather, it is a critical examination of the intellectual interest in the region from the 19th century onward. Diana Mishkova's extensive study concentrates on the ways various generations of scholars defined the Balkans, in order to inspect political usage of academic projects. By focusing on intra-regional geopolitical stakes and cross-border interactions, Mishkova changes the usual perception of the Balkans as a postcolonial space. With a fresh approach to the complicated notion of balkanism and a more than respectable corpus of critical literature, this research builds a basis for the further development of Area Studies in general.

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Mishkova, Diana: *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*. New York: Routledge, 2018. 282 pages. 140 USD. ISBN 978-0-8153-7670-5.

Abstract:

The historical textbook *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* isn't just another book on the popular stereotypical discourse about the Balkans. Rather, it is a critical examination of the intellectual interest in the region from the 19th century onward. Diana Mishkova's extensive study concentrates on the ways various generations of scholars defined the Balkans, in order to inspect political usage of academic projects. By focusing on intra-regional geopolitical stakes and cross-border interactions, Mishkova changes the usual perception of the Balkans as a postcolonial space. With a fresh approach to the complicated notion of balkanism and a more than respectable corpus of critical literature, this research builds a basis for the further development of Area Studies in general.

Dozens of studies on the 'Balkans question' fall into the trap of being stereotypical or superficial. Primarily, this is owing to the Balkans' position as an epicenter of imaginative geographies; secondly, because regional studies require an excellent conversance of history, geography, local languages, ethnography and many other disciplines. For these reasons, any attempt to scrutinize the ways the Balkans were used as an object of scholarly interpretations over centuries is one of the greatest risks that a historian can take. Diana Mishkova accepts this challenge in her book *Beyond Balkanism* and not only does she overcome it completely, thanks to her innovative approach, but she also provokes re-thinking of spatial categories we tend to use carelessly.

As a part of Routledge's series on the cultural significance of borderlands throughout the world, *Beyond Balkanism* critically follows the development of understandings of the Balkans that have emerged from academic practices. Through seven extensive chapters, Mishkova explores intellectual interest in this history-made region from the 19th century until recent days, offering a chronological overview of ideas and concepts, but, even more importantly, their political usage. Needless to say, the scholarly

works were and are regularly used for legitimization and empowerment of political discourse about the Balkans. Paradoxically, the relationship between geopolitics and the rise of balkanism has so far been neglected in academic research. Perceiving this literature gap, Mishkova starts her almost meta-referential work: to examine the role that scholarship played in the creation of the ‚European Orient.‘

In the constitution of Balkan studies as a distinct academic field, the work of scholars from the Western realm was crucial. But, instead of focusing on often recounted stories about extra-regional strategic stakes, Mishkova boldly introduces a fresh perspective, the so-called gaze from the inside. With respect to the earlier works in Balkan studies, she skilfully notes the necessity of paying attention to intra-regional dynamics in the production of ideologies, in order to understand the forces fueling the multiplicity of articulations of the Balkans (p. 234). Consequently, the core of the study is an inside-out perception, unlike the works Mishkova’s forerunners delivered. In this way she also contributes notably to the normalization of scholarly discourse on the region, which means leaving dilapidated paradigms of postcolonialism or post-communism when examining the imagology of the Balkans.

In the inquiry of the concept of “academic balkanism“ (p. 10), Mishkova’s comprehensive work takes into consideration a variety of studies which contributed to the conceptualization of the Balkans; historical, political, philological, geographical, and many others. Furthermore, it contains descriptions of the entanglements of the academic world with political and economic settings, which is the strongest point of the study. The author does not neglect any of the major factors influencing academic policy – from wider social ambiance, institutionalization, communication and networking among scholars to propagandistic exertions. And although she fixates on the region itself as mentioned, she does scrutinize external conceptualizations as well, in order to enlighten disjunctions and overlappings. By introducing this comparison between intra-regional and extra-regional dynamics, Mishkova manages to show clearly how the Balkans reacted to its peripheral status throughout the time in question. Particularly insightful is the Chapter V where she enables a deeper understanding of academic projects in the context of nation-building and larger conflicts in Europe.

The foundation of the book is made up of an impressive literature review of more than 600 titles and Mishkova competently operates with a large amount of data, connecting them prudently. Although remarkable from one side, this abundance of references makes the study overwhelming and difficult to navigate for readers outside the field or without prior knowledge. For fellow historians, however, her work with primary sources has to be described as outstanding since Mishkova does not allow earlier interpretations of regionalists to deceive her, but delivers her own sharp-witted reflections. In addition, every chapter is summarized with scientific confidence. Unfortunately, in the last chapter concerning the post-Cold War period the author’s voice is lost in the plentitude of materials, while it

would be much more relevant and significant for her own opinion on contemporary scholarly politics to come to the fore.

By demonstrating how academic discourses are constructing space, Mishkova reminds us of the importance of responsible scholarship. With an exposition of the complicity of intellectual elites for the misrepresentation of the Balkans, she fully accomplishes the research objectives laid down in the introduction. Moreover, the author proposes an alternative way of conceptualizing history-made regions and in doing so, introduces fresh material for debates related to the creation of space. Therefore, *Beyond Balkanism* not only allows for better understanding of this area, but represents an indispensable foundation for any future work about regional identity formation.

German Abstract:

Als die Wissenschaft die Politik traf: Die balkanische Imagologie

Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making ist nicht nur ein weiteres Buch über den weit verbreiteten, stereotypen Diskurs über den Balkan. Vielmehr handelt es sich um eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit dem geistigen Interesse an der Region ab dem 19. Jahrhundert. Diese umfangreiche Studie konzentriert sich darauf, wie verschiedene Generationen von Wissenschaftlern den Balkan definierten, um daraufhin die politische Nutzung von akademischen Projekten zu untersuchen. Durch die Konzentration auf intraregionale geopolitische Interessen und grenzüberschreitende Interaktionen, verändert Mishkova die übliche Wahrnehmung des Balkans als postkolonialen Raum. Mit einem neuen Ansatz für den komplizierten Begriff des Balkanismus und einem großen Korpus kritischer Literatur bildet diese Forschung die Grundlage für die weitere Entwicklung der Area Studies.

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