

Sarah Green, *Notes from the Balkans: Locating Marginality and Ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian Border*. xviii + 313 pp. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. ISBN: 0-691-12199-0

Notes from the Balkans is a penetrating and richly textured account of marginality in the Epirus area of north-western Greece. Drawing on several years' fieldwork, the book explores several well-hewn anthropological tropes -- "marginality", "displacement" and "balkanization" -- but does so with a distinctive interpretive lens. That lens is the fractal, invoked by Green as both a descriptive and an analytic device to explore in a variety of discursive and ethnographic sites the book's central problematic: why it is that 'the Balkans always seem to generate ambiguous and tense connections that ought, in modernist terms, to be clearly resolved separations' (p. 129). The result is a text that casts the anthropological study of the Balkans in a new light -- or perhaps, more accurately, *lights*, since it is precisely the multiplicity of layers and perspectives illuminated by the fractal-as-analytic that make this text so innovative.

Green draws upon the work of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern to emphasize the relational, self-similar quality of fractals. A fractal is a fragment, but a fragment which contains within it a replica of the whole, such that cutting, splitting and excision result not in "pieces" that need to be "put together" to reproduce the whole, but new wholes that are "the same but not-the-same" as the originals. The result is that 'fractals have no centers, no tops or bottoms, no clear edges, no beginning or end' (p. 135). These qualities inform the approach to rethinking the "marginal margin" of Epirus within the Balkans, and they provide a tool for unpacking what Green identifies as the hegemonic discourse about the Balkans (both locally and in the West) which 'insists that the region is fluidity and indeterminacy personified, right on the surface, a completely explicit fog, as it were' (p. 12) Crucially, moreover, the idea of fractal also informs the structure of the text, which is concerned more with interrelations and representations across scales, with that which is 'different-whilst-staying the same' (p. 22) rather than linearity. I shall discuss each of these dimensions in turn, before exploring the text's broader relevance to anthropological explorations of social identity in "marginal" places.

Green begins with what she identifies as the problem of marginality in her fieldwork site of Northern Greece. Armed initially with fashionable anthropological theories of marginality that see it as offering the possibility of "resistance or inventiveness" in the face of hegemonic discourses, Green soon found herself seeing the marginality of her fieldwork site as consisting, rather, of its indistinctiveness, in the dual sense of "not easily separated out" and "unremarkable, ordinary". On page six, Green comments wryly that she 'had evidently chosen to be in a place and among people that few thought were worth paying attention to, which appeared to have something to do with their lack of distinction.' She gives the example of the predominant term of self-identification in Epirus, "Gréki," to capture the phenomenon. According to locals whom she interviewed, the term has indistinct etymology, it being seen, rather, as a multilingual word that could be associated with Vlach and Aroumanian as well as Greek (p. 81). This, according to Green, is precisely the reason for its salience here, 'Gréki means "just Greek" in a nondescript, implicitly Balkan kind of way. When people used it in Epirus, it seemed to evoke this sense of a particularistic, located lack of visibility: of being Greek, but being Greek in a way that as not clearly distinct

within current discourses' (p.83). This same local consciousness (and occasional regret) at being somewhere "indistinct" also explains for Green the constant invocation she encountered from friends and informants not even to bother trying to understand this "foggy" place: 'this is the Balkans, Sarah. What do you expect?'

Green is not the first author, of course, to explore the way in which such "typically Balkan" forms of self-ascription, like other elements of Balkan culture, territory and linguistic structure, confound the attempts of modernist analysts to impose conceptual (or political, or territorial, or linguistic) "clarity". Indeed, it has become something of a commonplace in public and academic writing on the Balkans to portray the region as irredeemably chaotic, often accompanied by invocations that any such attempt to "comprehend" is doomed to failure. What makes her account distinctive is that rather than taking such assertions and self-descriptions as evidence for the ontological "givenness" of the Balkans' fragmentation or complexity, she probes them, rather, as indicative of a productive hegemonic discourse that shapes not only 'how things seem' but which is also 'at least partially constitutive of how things are' (p. 130). She includes within this critique not only those texts that have sought to unpack the "real truth" about the region, those approaches which insist on 'endlessly analyzing the details, endlessly looking for an answer, however complicated it might be, by rearranging the bits this way or that' (p. 138), but *also* those approaches that, in the face of such "complexity", deny that understanding is ever possible and that it is therefore better to give up trying. She quotes Žižek who, in a discussion of the Yugoslav wars, argues that it is only through a "suspension of comprehension" that 'renders possible the analysis of what is at stake [...] of the *political* calculus and strategic decisions which led to the war' (Žižek, 1997:62, quoted by Green, p. 138). Žižek argues that instead, we should rather do something 'analogous to turning off the sound of a TV'. This exposes actions as "meaningless gesticulations" and allows us to see that things only really make sense at another, deeper level of analysis, in which it is the great powers and their political calculations that become our focus of analysis (Žižek, *ibid*, quoted by Green, p. 141).

For Green, the problem is that Žižek's position, far from critiquing the hegemonic discourse about the Balkans, actually reproduces it. The current hegemonic concept of the Balkans is precisely 'that in political, intellectual, historical, cultural, and even topographical terms, the Balkans are fractal' (p. 140): a fractal that reproduces itself, self-similar, across all kinds of different spheres and levels of analysis. Rather, then, than "switching off," suspending comprehension, or moving conclusively to a more encompassing scale of analysis (say, from the particularities of ethnic conflict to the machinations of the Great Powers) we should rather look at the relations and replications, *shifting* scale constantly 'to try to understand the relations between them, rather than the fragmentation' (p.141). In other words, it is an attempt to look at gaps between layers, not as "empty spaces," which is how they tend to appear if we focus on "how things are," but rather as full of connections and interrelations (p. 88, paraphrasing Strathern). It is this approach that explains the scope of discursive sites and scales through which Green ranges in the remainder of the text: from soil erosion and tectonics to the politics of numbering and naming, to road-building and EU development projects, to the re-re-construction of re-traditionalized churches. These sites, though analytically dislocated, are actually not-quite-replications of the same thing: a process of 'appearing and disappearing, separation, recombination, and, for some, ordinariness' (p. 8). As Green herself argues, while the events or details of

each chapter are different, the reproduction of marginality through such interventions is a constant. In the final chapter, "Developments", for instance, she provides an account of a variety of EU-funded initiatives, which have sought to "modernize" Northern Epirus through a series of folkish cultural heritage projects designed to entice tourists to the area. Rather than a linear narrative of "development", however, locals themselves are acutely aware of the not-quite-replication of a series of previous modernizing interventions -- that 'no version of "modernity", "western" or otherwise, could entirely escape the ambiguities and gaps thrown up by the previous, and different, attempts at modernization.' (p. 246). Based as they were upon an attempt to transform "backward" culture and nature into marketable commodities, there was a great deal of local suspicion as to whether such "developments" were not, actually, designed to perpetuate the region's marginality once again. 'There was no final sense that this place had or could achieve whichever one was the "authentic" version of modernity, because of continual interventions and practices of "interests". Once again, things remained ambiguous, both the same and different, by being continuously contested.' (247).

It is with this "reproduction of ambiguity" that Green concludes her text. There is no dramatic conclusion or epilogue here - rather a partial and provisional closure, that reminds us that ends are, from a fractal point of view, also beginnings and middles and no-wheres. Indeed, it is striking that the final sentence of the book is a not-quite replication of the first, and that the most sustained theoretical exploration of fractals comes at the middle of the book, in the fourth chapter of seven, rather than at the beginning. The design of the book, then, is something rather close to being fractal itself, which will probably render it a useful - though challenging - text to teach with: one can find in a fragment -- perhaps especially in the dense, multi-layered fourth chapter, a re-fracted microcosm of the whole.

Green's text deserves to be read well beyond the bounds of Balkan and European anthropology. Although its innovations are many, perhaps its greatest contribution to comparative debates within the discipline is the potential that the fractal analytic offers for theorizing contemporary social identities. Discussions of identity that emphasise fluidity, complexity or ambiguity in contrast to the statisticians' essentialist categories rarely provide so subtle an analytic, so insightful a discussion of how statistical records *combine* statistical and non-statistical ways of accounting for things (chapter five), nor so rich an account of how hegemonic discourses of confusion and "mess" *themselves* become productive agents of self-ascription (chapter two). Green's discussion of social identification as fractal shifts the argument from "endless fragmentation" ("there is nothing stable here!") to *connections* between layers and scales. It thus provides a subtle and persuasive tool for thinking about the contextual specificity of social identities -- as well as their "self-similarity" across scales -- that will be pertinent far beyond the Balkans.

Cited:

Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.

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