

TZVETAN TODOROV: THE WEST DEFINED AND DEFINING THE EAST

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Abstract. This study explores how the West defines the East in the works of Tzvetan Todorov and how the definition of the West itself shifts with the discovery of the New World in the XVIth century. We will take as an example the impression of French travelers in Bulgaria in the XIXth century in order to show that the image of the East gets often misunderstood by the West. With the discovery of America, the definition of what West means changes. These definitions are fluid and modifiable and are essential in order to understand how later historical interactions between East and West are carried out.

Keywords: Tzvetan Todorov; East and West division and definition; Bulgaria; France; conquest of America; history

Introduction

In this study¹⁾ on otherness and divisions, we will follow the analytical gaze of Tzvetan Todorov (1939 – 2017) through history in order to see what role the West plays in the evolution of the East/West divide. Todorov, as a French linguist, sociologist, and philosopher of Bulgarian origin, has a special personal and professional connection to both Eastern and Western cultures. Throughout his career the intellectual never stops taking a critical look at Western societies. He extends his philosophical theories beyond the old continent, reflecting on the segmentation of the world and its divisions. In this study we will show that the West defines the East, sometimes wrongly, and that the West's definition of itself shifts with new geographical discoveries.

For the purposes of this study, the term *East* refers to the lands of the Ottoman empire (which Bulgaria was a part of from the XIVth to the XIXth centuries) and the Near/Far East. The term *West* encompasses the American continent and Western Europe during the Ottoman empire. We will follow how, through travel, the Western voyageurs defined the East, with Bulgaria being a focal point of interest. Later we will see how the West redefines itself through the discovery of America.

The West facing the East or France facing Bulgaria

As a matter of fact, in Europe the East/West division has persisted for centuries. Let us now examine how the West defines the East by giving the example of France and Bulgaria. In *The Morals of History* (1991) Todorov tackles an issue that he sees as both misunderstood and abused: the image that the West, and in particular France, gives itself of the East, in this case – of Bulgaria. In fact, this image characterizes globally the idea that the West has of the East. In the subsection “Bulgaria in France” of the book *The Morals of History* the author makes a summary of the French writers who wrote about Bulgaria or who visited it. The reference to this country provokes a dismal image. From the writings of Cassidor (468 – 557), Roman writer, to those of the French bishop Ennodius, sent on a mission to Byzantium (515 – 517), the Bulgarians are described as terrible and indomitable (Sergheraert, 1961: 15). An interesting tale about the Bulgarians that the French give themselves is found in the oldest French book, *The Song of Roland*, dating from about the year 1100. In *The Song of Roland* (sect. CCIX) the Bulgarians, a Hunnic tribe, are listed among the fierce and cruel enemies of France:

*Rollant, my friend, fair youth that bar'st the bell,
When I arrive at Aix, in my Chapelle,
Men coming there will ask what news I tell;
I'll say to them: "Marvellous news and fell.
My nephew's dead, who won for me such realms!"
Against me then the Saxon will rebel,
Hungar, Bulgar, and many hostile men,
Romain, Puillain, all those are in Palerne,
And in Affrike, and those in Califerne;
Afresh then will my pain and suffrance swell.
For who will lead my armies with such strength,
When he is slain, that all our days us led?
Ah! France the Douce, now art thou deserted!*

The Bulgarians – the Bulgars – share the same border with the Franks in Pannonia in the beginning of the IXth century. They help Charles the Great against the Avars, but following the integration of the Slavs into their state, the Bulgarians collide against the Franks. This explains the revolt of the Bulgars in *The Song of Roland* (Sergheraert, 1961: 16 – 17).

The Enlightenment continues the spread of the same hostile image of Bulgaria. Without having visited Bulgaria, Voltaire describes the “Bulgarians” in *Candide: Or Optimism* (1957). It is not surprising to see them again characterized as terrible and violent. Todorov notices a divergence – it is not Bulgaria, of which Voltaire speaks, but Prussia. “Bulgaria” has become a pure signifier synonymous with “barbarism,” according to Todorov. In *Philosophical Dictionary* (1961), continues Todorov, Voltaire gives a pragmatic definition of “Bulgarians or *Boulgares*.” The philosopher focuses on a few characters in Bulgarian history by sympathizing with

the Manichean heretics, an ironic slap in the face of the Church. What interests Voltaire is the anticlerical attack and the theological challenge (not the Bulgarians themselves) that become a propaganda instrument against the power of the Church.

F.-R. de Chateaubriand, G. de Nerval, M. du Camp, and T. Gautier are among the French writers who have indeed traveled to the East. Their target of interest are the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Greece. The Balkans remain a corner devoid of the attention of the West, as a Balkan exoticism is almost missing. These lands invaded by the Ottomans in the XIVth century and liberated by the Russians at the end of the XIXth century, were visited only by A. de Lamartine, P. Loti, X. Marmier, and E. Quinet, among others. In their tales these travelers do not give great priority to Bulgaria:

Because of their geographic position, lack of a glorious ancient period, and their relatively later (several decades after the Greeks) national mobilization, the Bulgarians were not only "discovered" last but, with few exceptions, inspired only scarce degrees of compassion in an otherwise typical tradition of neglect and indifference. (Todorova, 1997: 82)

Lamartine, who visited Bulgaria in the early 1830s, according to Todorov, exposes only one thing in his *Travels in the East* (1896): it is not the understanding of others, but the need for self-fulfillment (Todorov, 1991: 33). The poet tries to draw inspiration from this Orient which has a huge imprint on the Scriptures and Western culture. Todorov concludes that "the East exists only to the extent that it is necessary for the inner experience or the external expression of the artist" (my trans.; p. 33). The passage through Philippopoli (Plovdiv), Sofia, Tatar-Bazargik (Pazardjik), does not impress Lamartine. Instead of searching for a Bulgarian Balkan ethnography, he hurries to compare the Bulgarians to the Westerners:

These are the customs of our Swiss or Savoyard peasants [...] Their costume is that of peasants from Germany; women and girls have a costume roughly similar to that of the mountains of Switzerland. [...] I saw rural dances among the Bulgarians as in our villages of France. (my trans.; Todorov, 1991: 35)

One can feel a certain Western superiority in Lamartine's comments. As for the Bulgarians who are still under Ottoman rule, the traveler declares that "[t]hey are completely ripe for independence" (my trans.; Todorov, 1991: 35). The poet behaves like the *porte-parole* of the West in as much as the political life of the Eastern European countries is concerned. Sergheraert writes about Lamartine's opinion on the Eastern Question in Parliament between 1834 and 1841: "[...] the author asks himself the question "What should Europe do?" Hugo responds: "A collective protectorate of the West over the dismembered East" (my trans.; *From*, p. 24). Lamartine, just like Victor Hugo² before him, defends the freedom of the oppressed Balkan peoples. His aim is to show that "the cold and inert body of what is still called here the Ottoman Empire" (my trans.; p. 25) no longer serves any purpose, that it must succumb to Western European pressure. In the end, Todorov concludes that Lamartine's whole visit serves only one purpose: the glorification of oneself through the diminution of the other:

In vain did I flip through the pages of these books, looking for a revealing image of Bulgaria. What these pages teach us is about the intellectual, cultural, political climate in which they were born; we will know something about the France of the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries; but nothing about Bulgaria. (my trans.; Todorov, 1991: 35 – 36)

The examples from French literature commencing with *The Song of Roland* and continuing through *Candide: Or Optimism* and *Travels in the East* lead to a distorted image of Bulgaria. Not always accurate, this image shows that the European West perceives the Ottoman Empire as a controlled threat and that the lands occupied by the Turks are distant, culturally different, and mysterious. They are mostly defined as exotic or complying to the Western desires and needs.

America or the new West: The Western boundaries shift

Todorov distinguishes two types of exoticism in Western Europe. First, we note the primitivist exoticism of J.-J. Rousseau that is observed until the late XVIIIth century; second, the non-primitivist exoticism that begins in the XIXth century (Todorov, 1989: 299). The first is primitivist because the other is inferior from the European point of view. Quite far away and different, the other is seen culturally disadvantaged, even wild, in comparison with the Western Europeans. From the XIXth century, with the rebirth in the East, cultures such as the Indian, the Arabic, and the Japanese enjoy an unrivaled prestige in Europe. Then the Western Europeans feel the desire to explore the Eastern and Western cultures more extensively.

In *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (1989) Todorov dedicates an important place to F.-R. de Chateaubriand. The latter modifies the conception of contemporary exoticism. Chateaubriand, the first traveler to become a “modern tourist” (Todorov, 1989: 337), travels both to the East (Greece, Palestine, Egypt) and to the West (America). He becomes the forerunner of the tourist whom we know today as he is more interested in things rather than people, according to Todorov. Chateaubriand gives up the role of ethnographer in order to become a mere observer who has found the harmony between the man of nature and the man of culture. This tourist claims that “[the] West (America), is nature; the East, culture” (my trans.; p. 316). In America he finds “wild” (my trans.) Indians living in a “state of nature” (my trans.) who disperse and lose their knowledge due to the lack of writing. Whereas in the East - among the Chinese, the Greeks, and the Arabs - culture is eternal since it fuses with history and civilization (pp. 316 – 317).

The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other (1982) is Todorov’s first book on sociological studies. One reason for the linguist’s interest in the social sciences is his desire to analyze the language and put it into practice to better understand the others and the world. Reconciling his private and professional life inspires the author to make a scholastic detour into the social sciences. Another reason is the need to situate one’s own migratory history towards Western Europe in the world history of the discovery of the New West: America (Todorov, 2002: 181). A major influence on Todorov is the

work of E. Said *Orientalism* (1978), which also examines the relationship between the two parts of the world and the demarcation of the boundaries with the others.

Said and Todorov, two immigrants from countries formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire (Palestine/Egypt and Bulgaria respectively), analyze the relationship between their places of origin and their host countries (the USA and France). While Said chooses to discuss, based on his own experience in the East, Todorov writes by analogy (Todorov, 2004: 8) of the shaking of the notion of the West after the discovery of America. America becomes a part of the new West that gives a definition to the modern era. The two authors share different concepts of what the East and the West are, too:

I had the feeling that for Said the quarrels between East and West, between Communism and the liberal democracies, were conflicts of the affluent, of white Europeans, of groups that deserved to be sent packing, all of them to be measured en bloc in opposition to peoples of the South or of the third world, who were protagonists in a much more important struggle. (Todorov, 2004: 9)

The division of the world between “us” and “them”, between Westerners and Easterners is expressed differently, too. For Said it is the Western Europeans who created the notion of the East not to define the others (the Easterners), but to define themselves. Hence the need for this exotic and oriental creation – “the ideal other” (Talreja, 1998) which is quite distinct from the Westerners. In *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* Todorov succeeds in incorporating the relationship between the “I” and the “other” that he elaborates on in his article “Being and the Other: Montaigne” (1983b):

1) the relation between us and others: the manner in which a community perceives those who do not belong to it; 2) the relation between I and the other (autrui): the very existence of beings other than myself, or of a social dimension of man; 3) the other in the self: multiplicity and heterogeneity internal to the subject. (p. 113)

In the first category are included the Spaniards, the Aztecs, and the Indians colonized by the Aztecs. The “I” is embedded in the “we” in favor of the interest of the group. The colonizer Cortes can be included in the second category. He seeks to establish a personal and individual relationship both with the adversary (Moctezuma, the chief of the Aztecs) and with the collaborator (the Malinche, the female interpreter who becomes his mistress). It seems that Cortes’s qualities as a good negotiator make him a very modern man. Todorov (2002) says: “So he knows how to enlist the missionary as an ethnographer and does not neglect the business side” (my trans.; p. 186). A colonizer, an explorer, a diplomat, Cortes turns the relationship with the other on a personal level in order “to understand and then acquire better” (my trans.; p. 184). The last category will include especially the Malinche, this Mayan woman taken captive by the Aztecs and offered to the conquistadors as an interpreter. The multiplicity of the others in the “I” is confirmed in her, while the Spanish victory owes her a lot thanks to her cultural richness. America’s discovery is accompanied with a great surprise. Follows Todorov’s “Presentation” of *Aztec Accounts of the Conquest* (1983a):

[T]wo large masses of people live in mutual ignorance and then, for so to say overnight, they learn about each other's existence. Nothing comparable existed in the earlier history of one or the other half of the universe: there the discoveries are progressive and gradual; nor in their later histories: since that day, the world has become closed and finite (even though it has doubled in size). This meeting wreaked havoc on the existence of the Americans, but also, in a not less deep, but less visible, that of Europe, the part of the "old world" whose inhabitants made the decisive trip. Our modern history begins, too, that day. (my trans.; p. 7)

For him this discovery, making out of the world a closed and finite entity forever, also "announces and puts the foundation of our present identity" (my trans.; Todorov, 1982: 14). In 1492 the Westerners' trip westward redefines the West. They understand that the world is finite and that further discoveries are impossible. The newly discovered lands to the West of the West form a new West from which will henceforth depend the future of the old continent. However, in this new West the relationship with the others must also be changed.

In "Cortes and Moctezuma: On Communication" (1980) Todorov distinguishes between two types of communication: the communication practiced by the Aztecs and that practiced by the Spaniards. The first type of communication is directed toward the world, the second one - toward men. The first one lacks human otherness (p. 75) since it goes through theology: the Aztecs take Cortes for the God Quetzalcoatl returning to earth. The second one is familiar with human otherness (p. 79). The latter leads to a conquest because of the effectiveness of its engagement with others: Cortes is well inclined to learn the language and to find interpreters and spies in order to comprehend and conquer others.

The discovery of America marks the dawn of a new division of the world, of new relations between civilizations and, finally, of destruction. Todorov sees in encounter and understanding the end of the other: "To understand the other, our neighbor even, and consequently, to make oneself understood by him/her, is it not always to assimilate him/her, to reduce him/her to oneself, and therefore to destroy him/her?" (my trans.; p. 83). Exactly because of this trip to the West, in which it becomes clear that the other can be discovered, understood, and destroyed, we create a conclusive image of the world. Our modernity gets defined; our borders shift. We realize that man has total freedom of action. Thus, man becomes the source and purpose of the studies in the branch of modernity called "humanism."

Conclusion

To conclude, Todorov notes that the West has continued defining the East for centuries. Certainly, the West's notion of what the East is comprised of has not always been accurate. It shows that power relationships exist and that they have persisted for a long time. This is the case of the already discussed French travel writings about Bulgaria. But, the definition of this West has changed after

the discovery of America, of these lands further West, unknown until then to the Europeans. With this unexpected event, the West understands that the world is finite. This surprising discovery marks the beginning of our modernity, according to Todorov. In this modernity one tries to understand the other by means of a “[...] tendency towards homogeneity, which is a characteristic of modern rather than traditional societies” (Todorov, 1997: 6). The understanding of the other turns out to be in fact the destruction of the other leading to cultural homogeneity.

NOTES

1. This paper is a translation from the French language of parts of my doctoral dissertation at Tulane University, LA, USA entitled *Between East and West – The Bulgarian Francophone Intellectuals Julia Kristeva, Maria Koleva, and Tzvetan Todorov* [*Entre l’Est et l’Ouest – les intellectuels francophones bulgares Julia Kristeva, Maria Koleva et Tzvetan Todorov*].
2. In 1828 Victor Hugo publishes *The Easterners* in which he supports the Greek independence.

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