

COWAN, Jane K. (organizadora) 2000. *Macedonia: The Politics of Identity and Difference*. London: Pluto Press. xviii+ 166 pp., maps, figures, index.

**Aleksandar Boskovic**  
**U. Rhodes**

This book has originated from the Forum Against Ethnic Violence (FAEV) conference on Macedonia, held at the University College London on 10-11 November 1994. Although only three of the contributors actually had papers at the conference (Rikki Van Boeschoten, Loring Danforth, Jonathan Schwartz), the intention of the editor (Jane K. Cowan, who has considerable research experience in "Greek Macedonia") was to widen the scope of the inquiry into what constitutes "Macedonia" or "Macedonian," as well as how are these constructs made, conceptualised, and deconstructed. The time elapsed between the conference itself and the publication of the book points, among other things, to the complexities and uncertainties involved in the whole "Macedonian question." Following the defeat of the Ottoman Turkey in the First Balkan War in 1912, the region has been partitioned in 1913 between Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria (with a very small part forming part of what will later become Albania), and re-surfaced in the political changes that followed the fall of communism in 1989 and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991. The book is short (seven chapters plus the Introduction), readable, and presents a very good introductory text about some complex issues.

One of these issues is the very existence of the Republic of Macedonia (independent since 17 November 1991), a new country that perhaps exists and is inhabited by people claimed and at the same time denied by their neighbors. For some quite extraordinary political reasons (some of which look as if they have been taken from Eugène Ionesco's "theater of the absurd"), Macedonia is faced with very specific problems: their neighbors claim that it doesn't exist. Some Albanians claim

Campos 4:207-210, 2003.

(although unofficially) that the western part of the country (where the majority of

ethnic Albanians live) should be given huge autonomy and probably eventually should be annexed to Albania itself. Serbia and Macedonia have had some unresolved territorial disputes in the past, and the majority of Serbs believe that Macedonians are just “Southern Serbs” (a term used during the Serbian occupation, between 1912 and 1941). Bulgaria claims that, while Macedonia as a country exists, Slav Macedonians do not, and that they are, basically, just Bulgarians who have not yet realized their “true” (that is to say, Bulgarian) identity. More recently, the Bulgarian government has determined that there actually is a Bulgarian (and not Macedonian) ethnic minority in Northern Albania. (Which came as quite surprising for anthropologists working in the region, as well as various international human rights organizations.) Finally, Greece believes that Macedonia’s close relations with Turkey pose a threat to Greece. This is connected with the persistent Greek denial of the existence of a Slav Macedonian minority in its northern province and the refusal to grant this minority such basic rights as the use of its own (Macedonian) language.

The Macedonian language is recognized as a distinctive South Slavic language by all the countries in the world *with the exception of its neighbors Greece, Serbia (Yugoslavia) and Bulgaria*. Because of Greek pressure (the northern Greek province is also called Macedonia), Macedonia was, in April 1993, admitted to the UN (and afterwards to other international organizations) only under a temporary name (one which is still in use as I write, in November 2002): *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. It is still being referred to by this temporary name (or by the acronym FYROM) in official communications from the UN, EU, US, and other world organizations — but almost all Macedonians find this term (and being referred by it) very offensive.

The Introduction (written by Cowan and Keith S. Brown) prepares readers for some the complexities involved around the region, giving a fair historical overview of the issues, with emphasis on the construction of ethnicity. The introductory chapter also presents a good deconstruction of some recent stereotypes (like “the ancient hatreds” – which, of course, as they rightly point out, never existed). Unfortunately, there is no mention of the Cambridge University Press and its scandalous decision to withdraw, at the very late stage and without consulting its anthropology editors, a book on the “Greek Macedonia” by Anastasia Karakasidou in 1995 (the book was eventually published by the University of Chicago Press – and a review of it was published in *Campos* number 1, 2001) – something that caused quite a stir in the academic community. This episode also demonstrated some of the ways in which anthropologists construct their object(s) of study. The important part of this constructing are loyalties, mostly to the people among whom one did his/her research. There are also political loyalties involved. For example, I felt great uneasiness by the fact that all three maps in the book refer to the Republic of Macedonia under its “provisional” name – “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” – although this name is regarded as offensive and

humiliating by the Macedonian citizens. The maps use the “official” name only for Macedonia and FR Yugoslavia — all the other countries in the region being mentioned only by their “brief” (popular) names.

The chapters in the book oscillate between history and ethnography – for an edited volume, one must commend Cowan for the fact that the chapters make sense as a whole. Of course, there are personal preferences, and I have to admit that my favourite contributions have been results of old-fashioned anthropological fieldwork. Van Boetschoen explores the consequences of ethnicity in the district of Florina (Greece), while Danforth and Schwartz present the results of their research among diasporas in Canada and Australia. All of these contributions point to difficulties in deciding who are “the Macedonians” – sometimes different identities and ethnic allegiances can exist even within the same family. A couple of contributions bring in the issue of culture – both on a personal level (by Vereni, writing about a Greek man whose first language is Macedonian), and on a more general one (by Agelopoulos, on the multiculturalism in Greece second-largest city, Salonica). Finally, two chapters in the book deal with history, post-Second World War in the Aegean region (Michailidis), and more recent (Brown on 1994-1998 Republic of Macedonia). I believe that Brown’s overview of some state symbols might be of particular interest to scholars with interest in the region, while Michailidis criticises Greek historians of the 1960s. (Of course, I would also argue that the claim to “Greater Macedonia” is a bit exaggerated idea of something that could only be described as a “lunatic fringe” – Slav Macedonians in fact never possessed political, military, or any ideological strategy to achieve this fantastic construct. This fantastic concept was important in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I very much doubt of its importance now.)

Perhaps because this is a relatively short book, it mostly considers Greek-Slavic Macedonian controversies. It would have been interesting to include views, attitudes and (most importantly) ethnographies from the Bulgarian and Serbian side of the spectrum. (As traditionally Serbia and Bulgaria have also tended to deny the existence of Macedonian nation and language, for example.) Some future study of the region might also look at the views of Albanians (considered a “minority” in the Republic of Macedonia, but with huge political influence in the whole region), as well as ethnic groups like the Roma and the Turks. Furthermore, it is unfortunate for a book of this scope that no Macedonian scholar is included – some, like Professor Dimitar Mircev, certainly have something to say about the recent history of the region.

The concept of ethnicity is still very problematic in anthropological theory. Is it a concept or a methodological tool, something to be deconstructed or something that is just “there” and should be studied “as such”? These are important questions and the book does not pretend to answer them. Where I see the book’s particular value is exactly in problematising “ethnicity” (as well as “identity” and “difference”) through actual ethnographic data (especially Van Boetschoen, Danforth, Schwartz, Vereni), and providing material based on which further, more

Aleksandar Boskovic

theoretical debates can follow. The complexities and paradoxes of the whole concept of "Macedonia" are telling not only for the situation "in the field," but also for our understanding of the ways in which anthropologists construct what they study. I see the book *Macedonia: The Politics of Identity and Difference* as an important introduction to the crucial debate about ethnic identities, allegiances and the problems with dealing with them. However, this debate has yet to start.

---

**Aleksandar Boskovic** é doutor pela University of St. Andrews, "Senior Research Fellow" no Instituto das Ciências Sociais de Belgrado (Sérvia e Montenegro) e "Senior Lecturer" na Universidade de Rhodes (África do Sul).