Land reforms and ethnic tensions: scenarios in south east Europe

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Introduction: 'Staatsnation' and the 'purity myth'

BOTH IN WESTERN and eastern Europe the specific combination of territory, language, creed with citizenship and/or nationality, is generally perceived as an invariable and inviolable heritage of individual and collective 'identities' (Conte 1995: 138). It is a widespread belief that can be found even in the most common aspects of everyday life. This belief reaches its political-institutional achievement in the concept of *Staatsnation*. This German term of French origin (Pierré-Caps 1995: 56) is based on the doctrine according to which each 'nation' must have its own territorial State and each State must consist of one 'nation' only (Altermatt 1996: 53). It is not surprising that the past century has been marked by repeated efforts to make individual national territories more and more ethnically and culturally homogeneous, especially in south east Europe where the principle of *Staatsnation* was applied much later than in western Europe; that is, only after the downfall of the imperial multi-ethnic states. Connected with this 'logic of purity' land reforms played a significant role in this part of Europe.

Land reforms and 'ethnic recomposition'

It is well known that, in very broad terms, a land reform implies a redefinition of property rights on land through State legislative acts. The definition of land regimes are basic duties that *Staatsnationen* claimed from the very beginning, almost without exception. Hence, land reform as a legislative instrument is the cornerstone of any territorial policy that pursues the heightening of national cohesion and unity.

In substance, land reforms in the south east European *Staatsnationen* was meant to achieve the following goals:

- To carry through an 'act of justice' mainly by retrenching the latifundist regime in order to apportion 'the land to the peasants'. Land reforms were

intended to find a solution to the 'social question' which, given the specific socio-economic situation in south east Europe (as in several other societies), is above all an 'agrarian question'.

- To create an economic basis for the rise or growth of a rural 'middle class' or 'fifth estate' of wealthy peasants who could rapidly modernise agriculture, which was considered indispensable to a successful industrialisation policy.
- To 'nationalise' the state's territory by 'ethnicising' landed property: that is, preferably apportioning it only to the members of the 'titular nation'.

This last point, which is generally not officially stated in land redistribution policies, often becomes the heart of reform action (Warriner 1969: 11).

As far as south east Europe is concerned, the exigency of land reform rose primarily as the need to resolve the 'social question' which in this area is more an 'agrarian question', as mentioned above. From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, the rural masses' indebtedness and impoverishment, usury, overpopulation and unemployment in the farmlands, emigration, an extreme fragmentation of small and medium-sized property holding, and the persistence of latifundia, led to further precarious living conditions in south east Europe's rural regions. A lame and at times entirely off-the-mark industrialisation process, which was absolutely incapable of employing the agricultural work force surplus, heightened an already dire critical situation. Added to this was the international recession between the two world wars, which brought down both agricultural produce prices and exports.

In most of Europe's south eastern countries, these economic factors have created a widespread atmosphere of social tension that has often broken out into bloody revolts such as the well-known case of the Romanian farmers in the spring of 1907 (Castellan 1994: 51). This endemic rebelliousness, reinforced by sweeping historical events such as the Russian Revolution, summoned the phantom of bolshevism among the big landowners in south east European societies. Even the more conservative classes saw the pressing need to bring about land reform that would abate friction, protests and conflicts through land redistribution. It is therefore no coincidence that major land reforms with a liberal background were undertaken between the two world wars. The two main goals of the reform process seemed to be an 'equitable' property redistribution and agricultural modernisation. For these same reasons, some western European observers and experts were pleased by projects which tended towards deep socio-economic changes in the backward rural areas of Europe's south-east regions (Ancel 1930; Mirkovitch 1934).

However, under the influence of increasing nationalism, this attitude changed rapidly and land distribution's ethnicisation became the main characteristic of several land reforms in this region. In this way land reforms turned into legislative actions of a more political than socio-economic nature, which aimed

at changing the ethnic diversity of historically mixed regions along with disputed, changeable, uncertain and essentially unstable boundaries. From this geopolitical point of view, owing to the ethnic homogenisation and recomposition processes involved, land reforms were conceived increasingly often as a major remedy to the 'variable geometry' of national territories which had always ailed Europe's south-eastern States. Two examples clearly show the 'ethnicisation' of land reforms in south east Europe.

From the 'social question' to the 'national question' in Romania and Yugoslavia: the power of 'ethnicity' in land reforms

Romania

Undoubtedly Romania, after the actual liberation from Ottoman dominion in 1859, was the south eastern European country that had undergone the greatest number of land reforms. In terms of expected modernisation outcome, some of them should be considered to be among the most advanced, on paper at least (Roberts 1969; Hitchens 1994).

The first reform dates back to the period directly following the unification of the two Principalities, which became known as the 'Old Kingdom', until the end of the First World War. Since this reform concerned the expropriation of ecclesiastical property, it was a 'secularisation law' regarding mainly land that had belonged to monasteries since the Middle Ages, some of which were abroad (Holy Sites, Mount Athos, Sinai). This landed property accounted for more than a quarter of the country's land expropriated in December 1863. However, the then Prime Minister Mihail Kogalniceau, a great promoter of reforms that he deemed essential, aimed at a broader project based on two points: the abolition of compulsory labour and the establishment of private small holdings. In a country dominated by latifundism and boyars, the land reform law, strongly supported by Kogalniceau, caused uproar and was promulgated in August 1864 only after a bitter political struggle, the aftermath of which even included constitutional change. The law that came into force in 1865 released farmers from compulsory labour and 500,000 families were able to take possession of over 2 million hectares which they already farmed (Castellan 1994: 43). However, the boyars kept one-third of the land, the best obviously (Roberts 1969: 11), and were lavishly compensated by the State to whom the new small land owners reimbursed their dues in thirty-five annuities. However, the expected results of the land reform were quickly undermined, for several reasons. In the first place, too little land was assigned to too many candidates even though many farmers were excluded from the redistribution and went on working in semi-serfdom on the boyars' estates. Secondly, a demographic increase caused devastating overpopulation in the rural areas. Thirdly, the inheritance practice based on equally divided portions

gave rise to alarming property fragmentation (Mitrany 1930: 161; Roberts 1969: 11; Castellan 1994: 44). Owing to these circumstances, the new land-owners quickly ran into debt and because of the inadequate banking system of the times were compelled to borrow from boyars, large tenants, or usurers at exorbitant interest rates. Another strategy was to transfer the land back to the former owners and toil again on the estates, basically as before. Either way, researchers agree that within a few decades neo-serfdom had been established and that in Romania around 1905 the gap between large and small property ownership exceeded that of any other European State, including Russia (Creanga 1914; Mitrany 1930: 63; Roberts 1964:6). As Mitrany aptly states, Romanian rural society and economy at the beginning of the twentieth century were a distinctive mixture of feudal serfdom and capitalism (Mitrany 1930: 80). The farmers' chronic discontent, which flared up in recurrent uprisings culminating in 1907, is not surprising. The 1907 uprising came very close to being a full-blown national revolution. Its traumatic effect on the regnant house and the country's elites may be seen as a recurrent intention to sanction the new land reform. Avowed by King Ferdinand in a famous speech to the Romanian troops at the height of the First World War in April 1917, the new land reform was promulgated between 1918 and 1921 (Roberts 1964: 23). This second land reform also aimed chiefly at solving the country's greatest social problem, i.e. the age-old land question (Castellan 1994: 77). In fact, the law stated that landed property could not be over 100 ha. Any land exceeding this, expropriated from the big landowners through state compensation, should be redistributed on repayment in lots of 5 and 8 ha (Mitrany 1930: 136; Castellan 1994: 77). Consequently, 2.8 million hectares of the Old Kingdom's territory (one-third of it) went from the boyars to the farmers. However, Romania's borders after the First World War had changed considerably. In contrast to Hungary, which territorially had lost the most in central and eastern Europe after the First World War, Romania was the greatest winner. After the Treaty of Versailles in 1920, Romania more than doubled its area and had a 70 per cent population increase. Through this expansion, Romania had gained regions such as Transylvania, the Banat, Bukovina and Bessarabia that were very unlike the Old Kingdom. If the Old Kingdom had been a quite homogeneous entity, the new 'Greater Romania' was a rather more heteroclitic state, socio-economically and even more so ethnically. Owing to distinct historical processes, Transylvania, the Banat, Bukovina and Bessarabia had very different socio-economic structures and relations even in rural areas. Moreover, large minority groups lived in these regions of the country. Ukrainians (also known as Ruthenians) were mainly in Bukovina and Bessarabia, while Hungarians, Germans (Saxons and Swabians), 'Szekler', Serbians and others, were in Transylvania and the Banat.

As far as the land reform was concerned, the government in Bucharest was compelled to apply distinct standards for each region because of their marked

diversity; single laws were therefore promulgated and applied in specific regional contexts. Within this remarkably complex socio-economic, ethnic and legislative framework, according to 1921 official data, a total of 6 million ha were expropriated; 4 million were apportioned to 1.4 million farmers while 2 million became State property or were assigned to the municipalities (Castellan 1994: 78).

At first sight, the reform appears imposing. A strong modernisation drive could be hoped for, indeed, even a solution to the 'land question' in terms of the 'social question'; but this was not so. Before the Second World War, agriculture did not progress much and rural living standards were among Europe's lowest (Castellan 1994: 79). Moreover, according to the 1930 census, 6,700 big land-owners still held 24 per cent of the land while 2.5 million indigent farmers owned only 28 per cent. Notwithstanding the unmistakable increase in the size of the average holding, which had been yearned for and was almost unanimously held to be the basis of the nation's stability and socio-economic development (Ancel 1926: 178), the average holding was again slowly declining owing to rural overpopulation, which in turn caused extreme land fragmentation as a consequence of the inheritance practice in force (Roberts 1969: 53; Castellan 1994: 78). Both politicians' and expert evaluations of the reform were often as trenchant as Ion Michalache's, an influential leader of the National Farmer's Party, who in 1922 stated that: 'The ruling class made only such concessions as were necessary to assure its own existence. The reforms have been a kind of safety valve' (Michalache 1922: 5, 29, quoted in Roberts 1969: 30).

It is worth noting that Michalache, even with his slightly overstated and drastic attitude, like most Romanian authors overlooked the problem of the relationship between land distribution and ethnic groups. In spite of this intentional or unintentional reticence, it is now well known that Romanian land reform in the regions obtained after the First World War, primarily in Transylvania, became a 'thorny branch', as David Mitrany phrased it, within the troubled 'Greater Romanian' minorities issue (Mitrany 1930: 211). The promulgation of specific regional laws was perceived, especially by Transylvanian Hungarians, as the premise for an unchecked discrimination against non-Romanians. Likewise, a subtle indeterminateness and inaccuracy in the legislative acts, which cannot be examined thoroughly in this context, were considered deliberate and therefore aimed at establishing a land reform with a nationalistic bias (Mitrany 1930: 211). Indeed, certain aspects of the law postulated a tendency to exclude minorities from the reform's inherent advantages. In fact, in the acquired territories, especially the frontier ones, the land had to be assigned to veterans, and war orphans or widows who were obviously national Romanians (Teichova 1988: 43; Sterbling 1995: 91). This measure paved the way for a 'colonisation' of Transylvania. In fact, the lands on a controversial border were to be entrusted to loyal citizens (Sterbling 1995: 91). According to some Romanian politicians, for example Octavian Goga, land reform should be regarded as 'the most powerful means in the Rumenisation

process of Transylvania' (Mitrany 1930: 181). Almost concurrently the French geographer Jacques Ancel, without hiding his partiality for the 'colonisation' cause, literally wrote about the Romanian farmers' 'agrarian re-conquering' of Transylvania (Ancel 1926: 178). According to the authoritative historian Seton-Watson, in the regions acquired by the Old Kingdom, particularly in Transylvania, the land reform brought about a 'territorial Rumenisation' that finds its match in several other central and eastern European countries (Seton-Watson 1986: 79).

However, some further consideration of this point is necessary. The 'territorial Rumenisation' process enacted through the land reform was a reaction against the agrarian colonisation of the Hungarian government, which began at the end of the nineteenth century and lasted until the First World War. The Hungarian government had established a special fund of 3 million florins to aid national Hungarian farmers settle in the Transylvania districts which had a significant non-Hungarian population (Mitrany 1930: 214). In 1911 the fund had bought over 7 million florins' worth of property. Moreover, in the case of municipally owned landed property fragmentation and privatisation in Transylvania, settlers of Hungarian descent, if necessary brought from other regions, were granted privileges. Romanian farmers living in the same areas were, to a large extent, excluded from this land distribution (Mitrany 1930: 215). Mitrany also highlights how this intrinsically 'ethnic' colonisation policy created a desire for retaliation among Transylvania's Romanian population who then took a sort of revenge through Romanian land reform (Mitrany 1930: 215).

In Transylvania, class division almost coincided with ethno-national division (Mitrany 1930: 214). Therefore, it is not surprising that after the First World War land reform favoured the Romanian population (mostly farmers) while this was not the case for the Hungarians since most Transylvanian big land owners were Hungarian and would have been expropriated regardless of their nationality. However, the land reform was undoubtedly applied more rigorously in this region than in the Old Kingdom; Hungarian big landowners were more commonly affected than Romanian boyars. Nonetheless, farm labourers and small land owners of Hungarian descent rarely experienced impartial application of the reforms although the law guaranteed equal treatment. The simple fact of being from the 'enemy nation', therefore not the 'titular nation', could have been a discriminatory element in land redistribution (Seton-Watson 1986: 79). For example, Mitrany reports that Romanian authorities in charge of applying the land reform laws in Transylvania even expropriated several Hungarian small landowners, the official reason being that a church or a school was going to be built on that property (Mitrany 1930: 217).

The land reform was undeniably perceived in nationalistic terms as pursuing the ideal of a cultural and territorial 'Rumenisation' in the whole region (Mitrany 1930: 175), although in Transylvania there was no fully fledged ethnic persecution of minority groups related to the land reform (Mitrany 1930: 218).

The Hungarian and Saxon population also reacted loudly against this project and their spokespeople persistently denounced the shady and sometimes blatantly corrupt methods by which land expropriation and distribution were enacted with the intention of modifying this crucial frontier area's ethnic composition (Connert 1928: 262).

The land reform in 'Greater Romania' after the First World War, which should have modernised the rural areas, reducing the gap between Romania and western European countries, also failed for economic reasons. Nonetheless, it became a controversial issue among the various nationalities. It poisoned inter-ethnic relations, which had been strained for centuries owing to conflicting class interests, mainly between Hungarian big land owners and the mainly Romanian farmers which represented Transylvanian social life.

In conclusion, although the land reform discussed so far did not incite civil war and can definitely not be considered a form of 'ethnic cleansing', it may be said that it encouraged the nationalism of different ethnic groups, deepening enmities which were already present.

Yugoslavia

The centuries-old Ottoman domination in Europe ended in 1913 after the second Balkan War. The 'sick man on the Bosphorus' held only a small territory, namely present-day European Turkey. Serbia and Montenegro united after the First World War into the Kingdoms of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, which in turn became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929, and took over most of the 'liberated' regions; i.e. northern Macedonia and Kosovo. However, the Ottoman legacy was burdened with problems. In the first place, Serbia and Montenegro had an archaic social and economic system, a consequence of the breakdown of the original imperial patrimonialism based upon the *timar* institution. The sultan, as absolute ruler and sole owner of the land, entrusted military commanders with collecting tributes and recruiting soldiers. In exchange for these bureaucratic duties, the sultan allotted them non-hereditary lands called *timar*. The *timar* included the *ciftlik*: lands and real estate that the *timariot* (*timar* controller) could exploit directly for his family's needs. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, while centralised power was waning, the military commanders seized inalienable property that belonged to farmers and repeatedly appropriated lands of the *timar* on a hereditary basis. Therefore, the *ciftlik* areas were significantly increased although several remained quite small and would never become large landed estates. Furthermore, the *ciftlik* were privatised, *de facto* becoming allodial lands. Nineteenth-century reforms, despite Koranic law, gave a legal foundation to this unsettled situation and the term *ciftlik* became synonymous with private property. While striving to modernise and lead their countries closer to European standards, Serbia, Montenegro, and later Yugoslavia encountered the problem of

dismantling this semi-hereditary structure that was unanimously considered unjust and utterly obsolete. The most obvious solution to this problem was to promote land reform. This was also the authoritative opinion of eminent foreign experts, such as the renowned French geographer Jacques Ancel, who knew the region well having been *in situ* during the First World War (Ancel 1930: 1). According to all these western experts, researchers as well as travellers and diplomats, the *ciftlik* was perceived, on the one hand, as a symbol of a fearful administration and low economic productivity, and, on the other, as the bulwark of an agrarian system based on semi-serfdom: social relations that implied exorbitant taxes as well as arbitrary and iniquitous services for the peasants (Schultze-Jena 1927: 50). Present-day researches have re-examined this institution and have reached more discriminate conclusions (Adanir 1979); however in those days the *ciftlik* represented, figuratively speaking, an insult to civilisation. In light of this outlook, land reform was launched in an area whose economic situation was deplorable to say the least (in northern Macedonia and Kosovo) taking into account not only the *ciftlik* but also a fifty-year span of political instability marked by uprisings and wars. Therefore, these two regions were characterised by massive land abandonment and the utter insecurity of a territory overrun by bands of irregular troops halfway between a liberation warfare and simple banditry. Overall, Yugoslav land reform required an elaborate series of measures which pivoted, however, on colonisation. In fact, by the end of the second Balkan War (1912–13) a conspicuous migratory trend ensued, more or less forced, mainly towards Turkey or Albania. The migration was of *ciftlik* owners of Turk or Albanian descent who left the country anticipating changes to the rural property regime. Around 1913–14 indigenous families of Slav ancestry had already begun an unforeseen takeover of the deserted lands or were buying them at low prices (Roux 1992: 191). The governments of Serbia and Montenegro immediately tried to check this tendency. A law concerning the peopling of the ‘liberated’ regions, which provided for the state management of all deserted lands plus all lands lacking a property title, was promulgated in Montenegro in February 1914. This law may be considered a prologue to the land reform itself, the promulgation of which took an incredibly long time (from 1919 to 1934) owing to numerous additions and amendments. These few data provide evidence for the Yugoslav government’s significant efforts to modernise agriculture in the two peripheral and economically backward regions mentioned above.

Undoubtedly, the pillar of this complex reform action was the decree dated 24 September 1920 that regulated the new southern regions’ ‘colonisation’, whereby colonisation meant the granting of State lands to farmers. This project had two main aims:

- land redistribution to the most poverty-stricken indigenous rural population through the subdivision of *ciftlik*;

- the settlement of farmers from other areas of Yugoslavia on deserted and former State or municipal properties (Ancel 1930: 58).

The allocated plots were between 4 and 5 ha, congruent with family unit size. According to the reform's promoters, this amount of land would be enough to guarantee an entire family's subsistence. However, most of the land in Macedonia and Kosovo was unproductive and the allocated plots soon proved to be inadequate (Ancel 1930: 60). This already suggests that the first stages of the reform were indeed superficial, chaotic and irrational. Moreover, there were no plans for the subsequent establishment of any infrastructure. In 1923, the Yugoslav government, to cope with the operation's tangible shortcomings, undertook road, canal and rural housing construction, swampland drainage, a fight against malaria, professional training for farmers and the promotion of cooperatives (Roux 1992: 192). To complete the reform process, further government decrees enacted between 1931 and 1934 concerning colonisation demanded the migration of numerous farmers into Macedonia and Kosovo from other regions of the country (Roux 1992: 193).

At the time, several western European experts of rural problems were impressed by the accomplishments and regarded them as evidence of effective modernisation. In his book on colonisation in Macedonia, Jacques Ancel praised the Yugoslav land reform in relation to the wonders worked in Old Serbia and Kosovo (Ancel 1930: 2).

However, the Yugoslav land reform was not only a means to promote socio-economic development as it appeared to the enthusiastic foreign observers of the time. Nowadays it is well known that an ethnic homogenisation project linked to a clearly nationalistic policy, adopted particularly by Serbia since the second half of the eighteenth century, lurked behind the 'progressive' façade. In fact, in 1878 Serbia had been able to expel Albanians from the Upper Morava River basin, a territory assigned to Serbia by the Treaty of Berlin (Roux 1992: 187). Later, Nikola Pasic (Serbian Prime Minister from 1909 to 1918) took up this notion of 'de-Albanising' and simultaneously 're-Slavisng' the south of future Yugoslavia. He hoped to complete this project within twenty years (Roux 1992: 187). This plan was resumed in the Yugoslav land reform after the First World War and, as mentioned above, concerned only the southern regions of the new State, i.e. a region known to be a territory with vast areas of Albanian predominance. From a present-day standpoint, influenced by ideals of multi-culturalism, such an undertaking might seem monstrous. At the time however, projects of ethnic homogenisation by agricultural colonisation, i.e. more or less forced migrations, were deemed wholly appropriate if not expedient in increasing the political stability of a region, as in the specific case of the Balkan area. The 'normality' of such procedures, which we might define 'post-imperial', has been skilfully highlighted by Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker 1996: 10, 148–178). Corroborated by the

international community's approbation and firmly believing in the historical right due to their nation as well as the presumed recentness of the Albanians' settlement in that territory, Serbians and Montenegrins had no doubts concerning the legitimacy of changing the ethnic composition of these two regions since, according to them, their nation held historical rights over Macedonia and Kosovo which the Albanians had only recently settled. Albanians were seen as invaders or occupiers because for centuries they had collaborated with Ottoman powers often as high-ranking civil service officials. Moreover, Albanians were regarded as 'Turks' in the first place owing to their Islamic faith and secondly because their national identity had only recently become apparent; at the turn of the twentieth century Albanians as a nationality obtained only vague regional and international acknowledgement. The same religious faith plus a real similarity in some everyday behaviour, especially publicly, could have given rise to fabricated narratives that were easily utilised by nationalistic policies aimed at a shift in the ethnic composition of the southern regions. Therefore, Macedonia and Kosovo, the latter acclaimed as the 'cradle of the Serbian nation', had to be 'liberated' not only from Ottoman domination but also from the intolerable and unmanageable foreign, i.e. non-Slav, population. The true logic behind the land reform lies here.

It was not so much the need to modernise Yugoslavia's south as the eagerness to strengthen the 'national element' by re-Slavisng the two regions which counted (Roux 1992: 191). Consequently, the *ciftlik* liquidation was not principally a programme to abolish unjust and entirely corrupt, archaic semi-patrimonialism; it was a scheme to seize the land of a class of landowners who were regarded as 'alien' because of their ethnic background. The predominance of an 'ethnic logic' instead of a 'social logic' behind the elimination of *ciftlik* is confirmed mainly by the fact that most *ciftlik* in Macedonia and Kosovo were expropriated merely and tacitly because their owners were not of Slav origin, although their *ciftlik* were below average size; therefore, this was quite unlike the redistribution of large estates (Roux 1992: 194). As Ancel also notes, just before the land reform the *ciftlik* owners in southern Yugoslavia were not like the rich absentee '*beg*' who lived in Istanbul yet collected a specific income in kind from their landed property (Ancel 1930: 60). In southern Yugoslavia they were average farmers mainly of Albanian descent whose land was tilled by servants (Ancel 1930: 60; Roux 1992: 194), and not a class of 'landlord-capitalists' with a 'parasitic' mentality (Bobek 1962). In fact, only 37 of the 6,973 *ciftlik* catalogued by the administrators of the land reform exceeded 500 ha while 75 per cent were below 50 ha and half of this percentage was not above 20 ha (Roux 1992: 194). Although this data indicates the presence of a nascent rural middle class, the ideal aim of several land reforms, *ciftlik* were declared state property without exception and subsequently allotted free of charge to tenants of Slavic stock leaving the former owners with a quota from 5 to 15 ha (Roux 1992: 194). The 'ethnic' project of the '(re)Slavisation' of Albanian lands in the southern

regions, chiefly in Kosovo, is even more unmistakable in the colonisation policy. Agrarian colonisation was a remarkable undertaking charged with symbolic consequences particularly in Macedonia, the so-called 'cradle of the Serbian nation'. The goal was to re-establish the supposed primordial Slav nucleus through the settlement of immigrants from other areas of Yugoslavia. More than 100,000 ha, over one-quarter of Kosovo's agricultural land, was apportioned to between 12,000 and 14,000 families, according to different sources (Roux 1992: 195). In order to evaluate the real extent of the reform, the further 60,000 ha apportioned to 14,000 local allotted families must also be taken into account.

In line with the prevailing 'Yugoslavist' ideology of the time and propagated by the renowned geographer Jovan Cvijic, a confirmed believer in the historical ethno-national fusion amongst southern Slavs (Cvijic 1918), the newcomers hailed from various regions of the country. The settlers' geographic origin shows that the vast majority, 76.4 per cent, came from Montenegro and Serbia, 11 per cent from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1.2 per cent from Vojvodina, while 4.4 per cent arrived even from Croatia (Roux 1992:196). Since the authorities wished to avoid the dispersion of the immigrants, they were settled in specific colonisation areas from which Albanians were banned. In fact, if the latter owned any land within these areas, they were expropriated and then compensated either with low-quality lands far away from towns or with inadequate indemnities (Roux 1992: 195). A veritable ethnic segregation strategy came to the fore.

However, this was not the only discrimination connected with the agrarian colonisation that Albanians from that area had to endure. In Metohija (nowadays western Kosovo, near the present border with Albania) only 0.4 ha of agricultural land per person were left to farmers of non-Slav origin. Concurrently, agrarian courts of law would rarely uphold any appeals filed (Roux 1992: 195).

This ethnic struggle over territorial appropriation went awry and the Yugoslav land reform's implicit nationalistic policy fell short. One of the main reasons for the fiasco in Kosovo was certainly the demographic issue owing to the rural class' high birth rate, especially among the Albanians. This phenomenon with the settlers' arrival plus the small chance of internal or external emigration at the time brought about rural overpopulation in the region. A national and international drop in produce prices, meaning lower incomes for farmers, made things even worse.

It is not surprising that around 1930 inter-ethnic relations worsened, giving rise to strong tensions between Slavs and Albanians culminating in a violent atmosphere strewn with clashes and atrocities (Roux 1992: 199). The political and intellectual elites saw this crescendo of inter-ethnic clashes as proof of the land reform's political weakness and the need for more drastic measures to push back Albanian expansion in the 'cradle of the Serbian nation'. At this time, more definite projects, which indeed correspond to present-day 'ethnic cleansing' or 'ethnic purification', arose and multiplied for the active 'transfer of Albanians'

(Grmek, Gjidara and Simac 1993). The strongest supporter of this new policy which should have strengthened the (re)Slavisation of Kosovo, which was started but not completed by the land reform, was certainly Vasacubrilovic, an eminent representative of the Serbian intelligentsia, professor at Belgrade University's Literature Department, besides being a cabinet member of several Yugoslav governments after the Second World War (Grmek, Gjidara and Simac 1993: 149). In his famous conference on 'The expulsion of Albanians' held at Belgrade's Serbian Cultural Circle on 7 March 1937, Vasacubrilovic proved the relationship between the land reform's ethno-political failure with particular regard to colonisation on the one hand, and the need to relocate Albanians on the other (Gasparini 1999: 1). The closing statements of this text, which the 'ethnic cleansing engineers' of present-day former Yugoslavia regard as 'sacred', is worth quoting verbatim:

Compte tenu de tout ce qui vient d'être dit, ce n'est pas par hasard que, dans l'analyse de la colonisation du sud, nous partons de la conception selon laquelle le seul moyen efficace pour résoudre ce problème, c'est le transfert massif des Albanais. La colonisation graduelle n'a pas eu de succès chez nous, pas plus que dans les autres pays. Lorsque le pouvoir d'Etat désire intervenir, dans l'intérêt de son propre élément, dans la lutte pour la terre, il ne . . . peut réussir que s'il agit brutalement. Sinon, l'aborigène installé sur sa terre natale et qui . . . est acclimaté est toujours plus fort que le colon. Dans notre cas, il faut d'autant plus tenir compte que nous avons affaire à une race rude, bien implantée, résistante, et féconde, dont feu Cvijic disait qu'elle est la plus expansive dans les Balkans. De 1870 à 1914, l'Allemagne a dépensé des milliards de marks pour coloniser graduellement ses territoires de l'Est, en achetant des terres aux Polonais, mais la fécondité des mères polonaises a eu dessus sur l'organisation et l'argent allemands. (Quoted in Grmek, Gjidara and Simac 1993: 184)¹

This drastic programme, as with similar ones by Serbian intellectuals and politicians, remained a dead letter owing to the upcoming Second World War which led to Yugoslavia's 'first dismemberment' in the Spring of 1941 when eastern Macedonia and most of Kosovo were annexed to 'Greater Albania' under Italian control. As was to be expected, the trend shifted since the assimilation and expulsion policy was subsequently directed against Slavs, especially against farmers who had settled since the 1920s. Under Marshal Tito's establishment of the 'second Yugoslavia', pre-war boundaries were reinstated but the 'Albanian issue' was only 'set aside' until the 1980s when strong inter-ethnic tensions flared up again in Kosovo: the beginning of the present tragedy. Since the mid-1980s the 'transfer of Albanians' issue, devised between the two world wars as an extension of the land reform, reoccurred peremptorily in the Balkans, bringing with it hatred and bloodshed.

In conclusion, the Yugoslav land reform was surely not a prior instance of 'ethnic cleansing' but it certainly was a relevant factor contributing to the escalation of ethnic tension in the southern regions, especially in Kosovo.

Undoubtedly it can be interpreted as a primary historical antecedent to the conflicts at the end of the twentieth century consequent on Yugoslavia's 'second dismemberment'.

**Comprehending land reform experiences in south east Europe:
some theoretical comments**

First of all, analysis of the two cases examined indicates how land reforms enacted in Romania, and Yugoslavia between the two world wars were reputedly legislative acts to solve both the 'social question' and the 'agrarian question'. Actually, they were decreed to 'nationalise' the territory of regions with centuries of ethnic complexity in an attempt to turn the territory into a mono-ethnic space. Therefore, land reforms were extremely expedient for the exasperated and opposed nationalisms that clashed at that time in south east Europe.

The outcome of the three processes examined was to some extent to introduce the socio-political premises for the development of highly antagonistic 'ethnic discourses' and simultaneously induce 'autoethnification' and 'heteroethnification' processes. Until then, these phenomena had surfaced unplanned and irregularly, although it would be deceptive and misleading to assume that relations between the different groups were untroubled before the land reforms. In all two cases, a rising 'diversity', experienced and perceived daily, caused several problems among the different communities sharing the same space.

Owing to the new ways of acquiring land, a vital resource at the time, an atmosphere laden with inter-ethnic tension began to crystallise in these cases leading to an escalation of reciprocal physical and symbolic acts of violence. At length, land reforms with their 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' policies greatly encouraged or emphasised 'ethnic differences' and boundaries between 'us' and 'them' verifiable to date in the regions mentioned. In such cases, land redistribution through 'ethnic' criteria is an important 'historical precedent' that works its way into present inter-ethnic relations from the deepest strata of collective memory. Therefore, it is not surprising that distribution and colonisation laws concerning such a basic resource as land have caused strong 'collective traumas' by being enacted as already explained. To this day, after several generations, reciprocal feelings of mistrust, fear and hostility in areas that are still predominantly agricultural are reinforced and nourished by these 'collective traumas'. A study of 'potentials for conflict and disorder' from a historic-anthropological point of view wishing to overcome the instantaneous and mechanistic approach of a structural and functionalist type cannot put aside a sort of 'dramatological' analysis of the 'flow of events', i.e., the 'conjunctural cycle' distributed along the '*longue durée*' (Braudel, 1977: 47). Therefore, what Marshall Sahlins has called the 'structure of the conjuncture' must be reconstructed (Sahlins 1981). In other words, starting from certain historical events, apparently not very significant at

the time, but in the end crucially relevant, how such dramatic changes, which have repercussions to this day on the collective representations of 'otherness' and on the social relations between ethnic communities, are produced.

At this point, however, there is also the question of how the socialist political regimes, which for fifty years ruled over Romania and Yugoslavia, faced the ethnic polarisation: a pre-war legacy partly owing to the land reforms.

First, it must be emphasised that searching for a uniform and coherent 'method' used by all regimes under Soviet influence to resolve their specific 'national question' would be a fruitless task. Each regime developed its own peculiar policy; hence, even the 'historical patterns' are different. Therefore, present 'potentials of conflict and disorder' cannot be drawn from assumed elements of an abstract and monolithic socialist order, which existed only in the minds of western Sovietologists and Party officials' ideology. The circumstances in Romania, and Yugoslavia instead reveal that socialism applied two different 'policies' in each case:

- 'Increasing' the contrast between majority and minority. This was the case of Romania under Ceausescu, who with his peculiar national-communism tried vainly to 'obliterate' Transylvania's and the Banat's minority groups, especially the Hungarians, by means of repressive measures. During the socialist era inter-ethnic tensions were further sharpened but never reached the point of open hostilities mainly because the repressions were acknowledged for what they really were: the outcome of the personal policy of a tyrannical 'conductor' rather than the collective will of the 'titular nation'.
- 'Promoting' a contradictory and opportunistic strategy of the institutional recognition of ethnic diversity. This was the case in Tito's Yugoslavia, where such a policy played permanently and ambiguously upon the institutionalised difference between 'nations' and 'nationalities'. Owing to a fully apparent federalism with a deliberately inert institutional framework, which made all ethnic groups discontented in the end, pre-war problems and obsessions stemming also (but not only) from the land reform were hauled over and augmented from pre-socialist to post-socialist eras.

Looking back, socialism chose inadequate, grievous and often deliberately counterproductive strategies to 'manage' ethnic diversity. The existing tensions, rifts, and conflicts were aggravated or postponed. In the cases examined, among the elements that determine present 'potentials of conflict and disorder' there are processes, such as those instigated by the land reforms, which date back to pre-socialist times. Socialism was never a true break from the past, although to regard it as a mere 'freezer' of history would be a serious oversight. This is one more reason that further justifies the analysis of the 'structure of the conjuncture' so as to understand the 'logic' underlying the unexpected but foreseeable escalation of ethnic disputes in south east Europe since 1990.

NOTE

- 1 'Taking into consideration all aspects, it is not far-fetched that in analysing southern colonisation we have reached the conclusion that the only effective way to solve this problem is a mass transfer of Albanians. Gradual colonisation was not as successful here as in other countries. When the State wants to intervene to safeguard its own interests, its own land, it can only do so by acting ruthlessly. If not, the aboriginal, settled and acclimatised in his native land, is always stronger than the coloniser. In our case, we must also bear in mind that we are dealing with a tough race, deeply rooted, hardy and prolific; as Cvijic notes, it is one of the most widespread in the Balkans. From 1870 to 1914, Germany spent billions of marks buying land from the Poles to gradually colonise its eastern territories but the fertility of Polish mothers defeated German organisation and capital.'

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