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Review of *White Enclosures. Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route* by Piro Rexhepi

Vincenzo Maria Di Mino

Piro Rexhepi, *White Enclosures. Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 2023), 190 pages.

The Balkan Peninsula has, historically, represented the colonial Elsewhere of continental Europe. Suspended between East and West both culturally and geographically, exposed for centuries to foreign imperial dominations including Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman, and traversed by wartime destruction and Nazi-Fascist destruction in particular, the Balkan Peninsula has constructed its historical identity—multiple, diffuse, contradictory, non-unitary—precisely from the series of events that have passed through it. The last three decades, in this sense, have reopened deep wounds, which have erupted in violent and utterly necropolitical forms. The transition from socialist experiments to realized capitalism, fierce internal civil wars, mass migrations, and massacres and repressions have certainly highlighted the fragilities of an identity-building process cast down from above, and the political fragilities of the transition to the liberal democratic form. The combination of these events, in the eyes of Western observers, allowed the reopening of the Pandora's box of stereotypes modeled *ad hoc* on Balkan peoples, presented as barbarians and savages—incapable of control and therefore to be disciplined as much economically as culturally. Thus, the construction of an Orientalist gaze, to use Edward Said's categories, became the main point of access to the narrative of a geographic space that was formally European while being considered a colony. The Balkan Peninsula was to be shared economically among the hegemonic powers and culturally confined to the categories of folklore and the exotic.

White Enclosures. Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route by Piro Rexhepi has as its object of study the exposition of the set of colonial narratives on the Balkan Peninsula and, as its own purpose, the deconstruction of these narratives while bringing out the composite, unknown, and subterranean set of resistances that opposed different forms of domination. When studying the regime of coloniality, which exists in different social formations and racial assemblages, but is ultimately rooted in an economic structure based on the male individual and the family, we find that the subject upon whom these forms of domination were inscribed is a marginal and marginalized body. Rexhepi, in

fact, decides to situate the bodies of his analysis at the intersection of the devices of race, class, and gender in order to bring out the tensions operated by the processes of identity subjugation, both during the socialist experience and in the epochal transition to liberal capitalism, that played out on the relationship between whiteness and territorial-ethnic identity. Indeed, in the words of the scholar, the combination of these two elements contributes to the construction of a fictitious and artificial identity, which he calls *artif/ictive*.

By artif/ictive I mean the convergence of colonia, conscripted artifacts that today merge with fictive renditions of history (...) Thus the curation of whiteness in the Balkan borderlands is not just about bodies and borders, but also artifacts, architecture, and spiritual and historical knowledge-producing institutions that labor in producing racialized hierarchies of belonging where the EU comes to the aid of the locals to epistemically and historically re-Westernize and reconstitute themselves as white. (77)

What is at stake, for Rexhepi, is the construction of whiteness as a constitutive element of Balkan identity, anchored in a typically Western model that is linked to a specific form of masculinity—wasp, for that matter—and the *tout court* invention of an identity memory that becomes the narrative of a deep desire for integration. The liminal status of the Balkans, consequently, becomes the element that allows the Eurocentric and racial narrative to inscribe itself as an element that can heal the racial and cultural differences that separate the different identities of the Balkan peoples from the former, and to construct its own historical memory following the historical-political requirements imposed by the hegemonic culture.

In this sense, it can be said that the great value of Rexhepi's book and analysis lies in having presented the plots of Balkan histories and resistances as a geopolitics of whiteness idealized and actualized as a threshold of access to the Western world. *White Enclosures* is supported by moral and humanitarian colonialism anchored in military-type interventions and cultural operations of differential inclusion both within the Balkan Peninsula and in the countries of the European Community. Through this specific colonial outlook based on the dialectic between civilized and barbaric heir to Balkan domination, the Balkan Peninsula has been presented as the soft underbelly of Europe, exposed to the calls of the Other and capable of endangering European civilization—thus constructed over time as an imperial frontier against cultural and material invasions (of the Ottomans first, of migrants and refugees today). This imperial frontier condition, in fact, underscores the situation's inherent weakness and, therefore, its subordinate status along the line of race and civilization: the more this imperial frontier is exposed to the danger of invasion, the more it must be governed orthopedically, supported from the outside, and pushed into the (un)reassuring arms of racial capitalism. Reassuring global identity, on which local specificities are inscribed in order to be better exposed and sold in the market of human rights and cultural inclusion. The model of whiteness, thus, becomes the perfectible model of a racialized body, to be pursued, to be spread, so as to discipline marginal and resistant bodies.

Projecting the gaze further to current events, Rexhepi's book immediately interrogates the forms that European governance of migration take precisely along the Balkan route, which has been, and continues to be, fundamentally the only route into Europe by refugees fleeing the Middle East. Strengthening of the borders, in this context, not only operates to filter from a legal and social point of view but constitutes a real watershed between an identity solidly anchored in the white European-Western context and an identity (the Muslim one) considered violent and aggressive. This entails a further division within the migrant body itself; between docile and weak bodies destined for normalization and, therefore, inclusion as victims in the new social context, and resistant and indocile bodies, marginalized and expelled because they are considered harmful to the social milieu. This set of operations, which falls squarely within the statute of humanitarian reason that guides the overall governance of migration, racializes and sexualizes bodies, exposing them to public opinion as naked bodies destined for assistance or violence. The same kind of reason has operated for decades within the Balkan route.

Rexhepi's book is composed of five chapters in which he exposes, in great detail and through a specific theoretical positioning, how the construction of different identity frames along the Balkan peninsula passed through the devices of subjugation. The first device is that of whiteness, the minimum horizon of civilization, as opposed to a racial dimension of inferiorization of the Other. The second device, in close connection to the first, is the boundary, the territorialized dimension of identity; constructed through an exclusionary capitalist model of accumulation. This model has operated through the privatization and putting to work of specific subjective categories, making the cost of crises fall on the lowest segments of the social composition, on bodies considered unworthy of social recognition represented by labor. The third device, finally, operates the division of social composition and the marginalization of surplus bodies through their sexualization (that is, through the construction of sexual standards linked to heteronormativity). Rexhepi brings out the constant presence of resistances of bodies, which escape sexual normalization, and which he characterizes as queer, as marginal elements capable of sabotaging the grids of command and identity division, which in their making instead become elements of active solidarity among these same social segments. These resistances are those of Muslim bodies, which begin to develop during socialism.

The first chapter, titled "Nonaligned Muslims in the Margins of Socialism: The Islamic Revolution in Yugoslavia," shows how the majority Muslim Bosnian populations were already considered dangerous by the socialist leadership of Yugoslavia. During and after the tragic civil war, religious identity was transformed into an element of enmity, and danger, considered the bearer of violence and intolerance towards Western modernity. In this context, racial management operates by imputing growing violence to religious ideology, turning Muslim communities into sacrificial communities, victims of geopolitical violence. The second chapter, "Historicizing Enclosure: Refashioned Colonial Continuities as European Cultural Legacy," has as its object the rewriting of the past in the Bosnian context, precisely in light of the migration phenomena

and the construction of the moral panic concerning the Islamic invasion of Europe. The trauma of war and religious affiliation, thus, is overdetermined by the social relations marked by neoliberal globalization and the strengthening of existing power differentials. New levels of accountability were instituted for Muslim communities, who had to prove their degree of integration in order to be an active part of the process of rebuilding Bosnia's European credibility in the long postwar period. This process of Re-Occidentalization also had a strong impact on the construction of the imperial and post-imperial memory of Bosnia itself, whose imagery was engulfed by colonial narratives of a frontier past and present to be protected and developed.

The third chapter, "Enclosure Sovereignities: Saving Missions and Supervised Self-Determination," shifts its analysis further south, focusing on the history of Albanian identity and its diasporic nature, accentuated by mass emigration before, during, and after the collapse of the socialist project. Albanian identity, in this sense, Rexhepi shows, has historically been constructed as an element of purity along the border with neighboring minor Balkan identities and the spectre of the external Muslim one, especially by Albanian communities residing in Europe and the United States, as well as by Western public opinion itself. The Western recovery of Albania and Kosovo was seen as an opportunity, as much economic as political, to establish elements of strength within the Balkan peninsula, to transform the long-brooding desire for self-determination during socialist governance into a request for help from the global powers. The practice of an exquisitely colonial nature of appropriating and neutralizing the desire of the other—in this case of the Indigenous peoples—through one's own gaze. The fourth chapter, titled "(Dis)Embodying Enclosure: Of Straightened Muslim Men and Secular Masculinities," declines the colonial gaze by dealing with the instrumentalization and promotion of secularized Muslim masculinities by global modernization projects within the same Albanian and Kosovar contexts. The victimization of queer minorities in the social presence of Muslims made sexuality unsafe and dangerous and necessitated concrete legislative interventions. If white queer bodies were presented as victims to be protected, Muslim queer bodies were presented not only as elements capable of representing Balkan peoples' desire for whiteness, but also as allegories of the incompleteness of bodies dislocated between racial-religious affiliation and Western orientation. The construction of queer normativity, in this sense, came closer to the construction of an idealistic straightness of the sexual and racial minority than to the concrete desire for freedom of the Balkan queer communities themselves.

The last chapter, "Enclosure Demographics: Reproductive Racism, Displacement, and Resistance", deals with the connection between anti-Muslim and anti-Roma racism in Bulgaria, including the media construction of the concept of 'demographic invasion' by Roma and Islamic minorities (capable of attacking the territorial and identity integrity of the nation, including through the sexual differentiation of bodies). The construction of this colonial and homophobic imaginary, which characterizes both capitalist and post-socialist narratives, can and must be subverted, according to Rexhepi, by the proliferation of

undercommon narratives, capable of unraveling the subterranean alliances between marginal bodies and identities and deconstructing the need for security that pervades mainstream cultural frames, restoring strength and words to these excluded and victimized bodies. The marginal body, at this height, is a resilient collective body that highlights violence and aspires to its own self-determination beyond the grids of victimization and colonial differentiation.

In conclusion, it can be safely said that Rexhepi's work is a necessary and highly topical one, providing conceptual and political compasses to navigate within the puzzle of hegemonic and marginal identities, especially at a juncture when the new regime of global warfare uses lesser bodies as a threshold of division between friend and foe; progressively compressing and eliding the right to dissent and social conflict against this state of affairs. Indeed, the author's decolonial approach is an excellent starting point for interrogating the effects of liberal governance and imagining a concrete alternative to war and the washing of differences.

Biography

Vincenzo Di Mino, a graduate student in Political Science, is an independent researcher in political and social theory.