

Book Review: Macedonia: The Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Foundations of a Balkan State, edited by Victor C. De Munck and Ljupcho Risteski

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Macedonia: The Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Foundations of a Balkan State is a collection of twelve essays taking an in-depth look at the multi-layered relationships between different groups in Macedonia from an anthropological perspective. **Daniel M. Knight** finds the book to offer revealing insights into the rich tapestry of life in modern-day Macedonia, especially in the areas of religion and ethnicity.



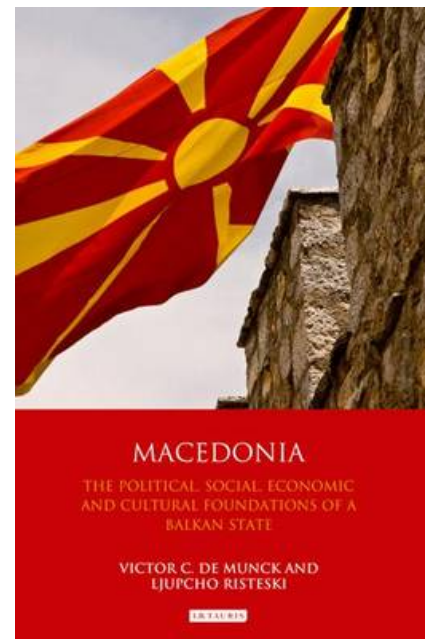
Macedonia: The Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Foundations of a Balkan State.
Edited by Victor C. De Munck and Ljupcho Risteski. I.B. Tauris. October 2012.

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Macedonia: The Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Foundations of a Balkan State is an ambitious attempt at a holistic evaluation of contemporary Macedonia and is a much needed contribution to the anthropology of the Balkans. Through diverse ethnographic cases exploring religious belief, ecology, space, gender and wider questions of international politics and European integration, the reader is invited to acknowledge the editors' premise that Macedonia is a 'sustainable multicultural Balkan country'.

Approaching the volume as a Greek specialist working in the Greek peripheries of Thessaly and Western Macedonia, I fall into the category of scholar identified by Victor de Munck and Ljupcho Risteski on page one of the introduction. The editors have made a conscious effort to move away from yet another analysis of 'The Macedonian Question', often provided by academics with primary interests south of the border. Instead they offer insights into the rich tapestry of everyday life in a complex modern nation-state. The repetitive introductory statements in favour of participant observation as the principal mode of enquiry may seem obsolete; surely everyone knows that participant observation is the mainstay of anthropological enquiry, it is the very foundation of our discipline? However, recent trends for the over-theorisation of social practice regularly cloud 'lived experience'. The emphasis placed here on participant observation not only opens the discussion to readers beyond the realm of anthropology, but also serves as a much needed reminder of the rewards of staying true to a method at the heart of the discipline.

With this tantalising preface in place, one delves into the first chapter with some anticipation, expecting to move away from well-documented stereotypes towards a qualitative appraisal of life in contemporary Macedonia. Victor Friedman's contribution is all about Greece. He describes an attack in Athens by the far-right openly neo-Nazi 'Golden Dawn' at a book launch for the first Greek-Macedonian dictionary. Whilst, personally, I wholeheartedly share Friedman's position that the lack of Greek recognition for ethno-linguistic minorities is tiresome and in many respects deplorable, I honestly fail to see what this paper adds to a volume on everyday life in contemporary Macedonia. As a fellow witness of nationalist outbursts both in Greece and abroad, the ethnographic endeavour should really be on attempting to understand the rising popularity of the Greek far-right rather than essentialising how 'Greeks' have tried to eliminate other languages in the Balkans for centuries. In this respect I am unsure



whether Friedman's contribution assists our endeavour to unpack a native's point of view. The argument is not helped by the subjective tone and temporal leaps from pre-independence texts published in 1802 to an attack by a notorious neo-Nazi group in 2009. The cultural and historical understanding of Greek-Macedonian ethno-linguistic relations on the local level, although a well-trodden path, may have been a more valuable contribution as the first chapter of this particular volume.

In following chapters, Anastasia Karakasidou and Jonathan Schwartz discuss environment and ecology. On the Greek side of the border, Karakasidou reflects on fieldnotes taken in the late 1980s that illustrate changes in environmental practice in the name of modernity and nationalism. Her retrospective observations on 'water, air, fire, earth' are important and highlight how the anthropological lens is so often shaped by the immediate concerns of the researcher. Her discussion of cancer will be familiar to any Greek ethnographer. However, in such local accounts it is often difficult to identify the point where fact and fiction merge, such is the dense fusion of individual experience, media reportage and conspiracy theory. Karakasidou's concerns with waste, responsibility, and technological development will resonate with anyone interested in Balkan renewable energy initiatives that have been packaged as essential to political and economic 'progress'. On the Greek-Albanian-Macedonia border Schwartz analyses the role of civil society in environmental programmes around Lake Prespa. His engaging paper is a strong contribution to 'NGOgraphy' and provides a fascinating background to ecological management in the area.



Macedonian Roma community in celebration. Credit: [moroccanmary](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Religion and ethnicity are prominent themes throughout the volume. Violeta Duklevska Schubert explores the affinity between Orthodox Christianity and national identity. In a paper that may appeal to scholars from other Balkan contexts, she presents how religion and culture are ideologically and spatially intertwined. Orthodoxy provides the 'background noise' of everyday social life. Although this view is by no means revolutionary, Schubert provides a well-rounded account of how religion is lived on an everyday basis. Imbued with the themes of religion and ethnicity, Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic and Shayna Plaut offer papers on Roma Gypsies. In a rich socio-historic account Oustinova-Stjepanovic does an impressive job of tying together the ethnographic particularities of

'performative failure' as her subjects attempt to become 'true Islamic mystics'. Apart from providing a delicate essay on Dervish lodges, she also manages to capture the continued Ottoman presence in the lives of some 21st century Macedonians which raises fascinating questions of historical consciousness and temporality. Plaut's chapter focuses on external studies of Macedonian Roma within a broader context of Western presence in the Republic. She discusses civil society movements in relation to neo-colonialism that is poignant across the Balkans, as well as raising complicated issues of citizenship and sovereignty.

Other chapters in the volume examine issues of European belonging (Ilka Thiessen, de Munck and Joseph Moldow), nationalism and cultural heritage (Davorin Trpeski), gender (de Munck and Trpeski) and minorities (Burcu Akan Ellis). I especially enjoyed the chapter by Rozita Dimova entitled "Topography of Spatial and Temporal Ruptures" where the author draws on the work of Walter Benjamin to explore time and materiality. Anyone with interests in theories of time as 'topological' or 'topographical' as opposed to linear will enjoy this paper, based as it is in blend of sound qualitative research and historical 'detective work'. Her chapter leaves one wanting to read more.

On the whole the volume is a pleasurable read. It succeeds in framing the 'multilayered relationships between different groups in Macedonia', building up from the grassroots to questions of state politics and European belonging. This 'scaling' is essential for any contemporary anthropological study of the Balkans. Indeed, some contributors, such as Oustinova-Stjepanovic, propose that the comparative study should stretch far beyond the borders of southeast Europe. The underlying flavour of Ottoman history that runs throughout the book provides a welcome sub-plot. This informs an ongoing theme of remembering/forgetting that is particularly intriguing. There is enough to hold the attention of readers with specialist interests in the wider Balkan region and although some chapters may leave the reader yearning for more detail, in a collection of twelve short essays this can only be a good thing.

Daniel M. Knight is National Bank of Greece Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics and Political Science. His ongoing anthropological research on the Greek economic crisis addresses issues of polytemporality, historical consciousness and entrepreneurship. Daniel is currently leading a project on economic sustainability and the Greek photovoltaic energy initiative. [Read more reviews by Daniel](#)

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