Raymond DETREZ
University of Ghent
Belgium

ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS
IN RURAL AND URBAN ENVIRONMENTS. THE CASE OF PLOVDIV AND THE PLOVDIV REGION

Abstract: In the pre-national era in the Balkans, ethnonyms could have different meanings and refer not only to ethnic, but also confessional, social and occupational groups. In addition, a person’s claims about his/her ethnic or national appurtenance had a different importance, other emotional connotations and moral implications depending on the historical period, social status and educational level of the speaker. In our presentation we aim to show differences in understanding of ethnic appurtenance in the village and the city, relying on available information on the status in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv and the surrounding villages. It appears that political maturing of ethnic consciousness in the village took place partially as resistance to the cultural influence of French Enlightenment, which was promoted and spread in cities.

Keywords: Balkans, Plovdiv, ethnicity, Enlightenment, city, village.

At variance with sociologists and anthropologists, most historians rather “unhistorically” deal with issues of ethnic or national consciousness. Proceeding from the recurrent presence of ethnonyms in the sources, they often seem to assume that these ethnonyms have had throughout the ages the same meaning and have implied similar feelings of solidarity with and allegiance to an ethnic or ethno-national community as we today may
experience. However, since ethnic or, for that matter, national consciousness is not inborn, but results from the individual going through a long and complex process of socialization, it is evident that what one has in mind identifying him- or herself as Belgian, German, Greek, Serb or whatever considerably differs depending on whether this statement is made in the Middle Ages, in the time of Enlightenment, in the nineteenth or the twenty-first century. Similarly, it seems reasonable to assume that in the past ethnic or national awareness also differed depending on gender, age, social class, occupation, and suchlike. It is well known that new political ideas – and after all the concept of ethnic identity as inherent to every human being and as a basic factor of social organization is also a political idea – spread more rapidly in urban than in rural environments, and more rapidly among the educated middle-class than among other social classes. In the same way, judging by the gender of their most vociferous supporters, it appears that at least in the past new political ideas were adopted more readily by men than by women. Consequently, there also must have existed differences in the way these various groups perceived themselves in terms of ethnic or national belonging, especially in times when public education, widely accessible media, military service, social intermingling and minority policies aiming at creating a more or less homogeneously thinking and feeling society did not yet exist.

In this chapter, in spite of the scarcity of the sources, I will attempt to shed some light on the disparities in ethnic/national consciousness between peasants and city-dwellers. My observations are based on the situation in Bulgaria in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century – the period preceding the so-called “national awaking” – and more particularly in the city of Plovdiv and in the surrounding Thracian villages.

A first particularity to be taken into consideration is the difference between the city and the villages as far as the ethnic composition of the population is concerned. Plovdiv was a rather cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional city. There were Turks, Greeks, Orthodox Bulgarians, Muslim Bulgarians (known as Pomaks), Catholic Bulgarians (known as Paulicians), Vlachs, Albanians, Armenians, Jews, and others. Ethnic and religious groups were roughly distributed over various mahalas or “neighbourhoods”. As a rule, a mahala was religiously and in most cases also
Ethnic Consciousness in Rural and Urban Environments. The Case of Plovdiv and the Plovdiv Region

ethnically homogeneous.¹ The region around Plovdiv was multi-ethnic and multi-confessional as well. Stanimaka (now Asenovgrad), a small town south of Plovdiv, had a population of Bulgarians, Greeks and Turks, but the villages were in general both ethnically and religiously homogeneous – Bulgarian, Greek, Pomak or Turkish.²

In the villages everyday contacts between the various religious communities were rather scarce. In Plovdiv too, they were limited mainly to the čaršija. However, within the respective religious communities, contacts between people belonging to different ethnic groups were quite frequent. A witness to this appear to be the many inter-ethnic marriages in Plovdiv, especially among Orthodox Greeks, Bulgarians, Vlachs, and even Arabs.³ Such marriages occurred more seldom in the countryside, where ethnic groups lived separated from each other. Tellingly, marriages within the same ethnic group of people of different creeds – e.g. between an Orthodox Christian and a Catholic or a Muslim Bulgarian – brought shame and scandal in the family just the same. Obviously, a common ethnic background did not remove the religious barriers to such marriages, which is a clear indication of the predominance of the feelings of religious over ethnic allegiance.

Let us have a closer look at the situation. Sources – autobiographical marginalia, saints’ lives, official documents, travel accounts by foreigners et cetera – reveal that prior to the nineteenth century Bulgarians, Greeks, Vlachs and others, both in the cities and the villages, most often denoted themselves as “Christians” – always in the sense of Orthodox (pravoslavni) Christians – while ethnonyms were used far less frequently.⁴ “Greek” and

¹ For the ethnic composition of the Orthodox Christian population in Plovdiv, see K. Moravenov, Pametnik za plovdivskoto hristijansko naselenie v grada i za obštite zavedenija po proiznosno predanje, Plovdiv 1984.
² For the ethnic composition of the population in the surroundings of Plovdiv, see K. Jireček, Knjažestvo Bălgarija, Plovdiv 1899, 133–134.
⁴ D. Angelov, Bălgarskata norodnost prez vekovete, Stara Zagora 1994, XXX.
“Romaean” (Slavic Romej, Greek Romeos) were often used as a synonym of “Christian”. Thus, in 1819, Priest Konstantin writes:

There are five varieties of citizens in this city [Plovdiv]: Turks, Orthodox Christians, who call themselves Romaeans, Armenians, Manichaeans, who are usually called Paulicians, and Jews.\(^5\)

Obviously, the many Bulgarians (and Vlachs) in Plovdiv were included into the category “Romaeans”. Benjamin Barker, a British traveler, noticed in the 1830s that both the Greek and the Bulgarian language are made use of for reading and writing by the Greeks of Adrianople, but in the villages on the road to Philippopolis [Plovdiv], they are better acquainted with the Bulgarian language.\(^6\)

The Greeks who “are better acquainted with the Bulgarian language” must have been Bulgarians, called “Greeks” here in the sense of Orthodox Christians.

A last of the numerous examples that could be given are the yearly accounts, kept from 1838 to 1858 by the Orthodox Christian community in Edirne, consisting of Bulgarians and Greeks. These accounts began every year with the formula: “The accounts of the community of the Romaeans (Τῆς πολιτείας Ρωμαίων).” In 1858, the formula sounded: “The accounts of the community of the Greeks in Adrianople (Τῆς Πολιτείας Γραίκων Αδριανούπολεως).” Again, “Greek” is used here as a synonym of “Romaean” in the sense of Orthodox Christian. Obviously, the Bulgarians in Edirne, who by the way occupied leading positions in the Edirne community, had no problem being called “Romaeans” or “Greeks”.

The differences between Plovdiv and the surrounding villages regarding the ethnic and confessional appurtenance of the population produced different ways of collective self-identification. Although both in the city and in the villages, people identified themselves as Orthodox Christians in the first place, in the villages a primeval feeling of ethnic identity was preserved, clearly distinguishing Bulgarians from Greeks. Ethnonyms were used there far more frequently, at least judging by their recurrence in

---

Ethnic consciousness in rural and urban environments. The case of Plovdiv and the Plovdiv region

Folk songs. Although these ethnonyms seem to have belonged to the realm of folklore and of highly mythologized historical memories, there is little doubt that ethnic awareness was more vivid in the countryside than in the city. However, there is no indication that there existed among the peasants an awareness of the ethnic community as a whole or of the entire territory it occupied. In the sources, “fatherland” (otečestvo) refers exclusively to the native country – a limited space (a village, a small number of villages, a valley, an island) within borders of which face-to-face contact was probable. Everyone, who did not belong to the tiny “fatherland” was a foreigner (čužd, as opposed to naš, “ours”), even if he belonged to the same ethnic group.

Among the urban population in Plovdiv ethnic identity tended to be replaced by a new kind of a supra-ethnic local collective identity, based on Plovdiv citizenship, occupation, social position, and, from the early nineteenth century onward, on the presence of a cosmopolitan Enlightenment culture. Immigrants from the villages gradually got absorbed in this particular urban social environment until, from the 1830s on, when their numbers became too huge and they ceased to be susceptible to assimilation.

The fading away of ethnic consciousness among the urban elite in Plovdiv – or, to put it more positively, its replacement by a new brand of consciousness – resulted from two main developments. In the first place, there was the deliberate policy, pursued by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, to impose on its entire flock a shared supra-ethnic religious identity, to the detriment of ethnic identity, in order to forge a coherent and solidary Orthodox Christian community, able to resist Muslim proselytism. This policy was most effective in cities with an episcopal see, where the presence of the Patriarchate was most prominent. It was less effective in the villages. For the same reason, due to the presence of the patriarchal clergy, in the cities Church Slavonic as a rule was replaced by Greek as a liturgical language, while in the villages Church Slavonic services survived. Since until late in the eighteenth century schools mainly trained

---

6 D. Angelov, Bălgarskata narodnost, 117–124, 162.
7 H. Gandev, Problemi na bălgarskoto Văzražđane, Sofia 1976, 736.
future priests and anagnosts (clerics who read aloud from the Gospel during church services), the language the pupils had to master was the language of the liturgy: liturgical Greek in the cities, Church Slavonic in the villages and monasteries. (The language of instruction was most often the local Greek or Bulgarian dialect.) In Plovdiv there existed neither churches celebrating the liturgy in Church Slavonic, nor Bulgarian schools prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. However, in spite of its insistence on the use of liturgical Greek in church services, the Patriarchate of Constantinople was not interested in imposing a Greek ethnic identity; its concern was basically to linguistically increase the cohesion of the Orthodox Christian flock.

Another factor explaining the development of a new local collective identity in Plovdiv had to do with economic and social developments. In the early nineteenth century, due to the modernization of Ottoman society announcing the Tanzimat, Bulgaria and Plovdiv in particular entered a period of increased economic activity, resulting in the emergence of a dynamic multiethnic commercial petty bourgeoisie. Since Greeks occupied a pivotal place in internal and international trade, the language of business all over the Balkans was Greek. Greek became the colloquial language of the urban establishment, shared by all ethnic groups. The notions “Greeks” or “Romaeans” did no longer refer solely to religious affiliation (in addition, of course, to ethnic appurtenance), but also to the social class and status, regardless of ethnic affiliation. The use of Greek had grown into a distinctive feature of the urban upper class, the language marking the social distinction between well-to-do and educated citizens and poor and allegedly “backward” peasants who continued to speak their vernaculars.

On the one hand, the feeling of inferiority Bulgarian peasants nourished transpires from the eagerness with which the more ambitious and talented among the Bulgarian peasant immigrants in Plovdiv integrated into the Greekspeaking cosmopolitan urban establishment. A particular social category, the so-called gudilas, came into being – former Bulgarian peasants in Plovdiv who, although they spoke a kind of gibberish Greek larded with Bulgarian and Turkish words, pretended to be “Greeks”. They were ashamed of their Bulgarian origin and attempted to hide it, adopting Greek names and lifestyle. Interestingly, women appear to have played a substantial part in the “gudilization” (pogudiljavane) of the Bulgarians. It was a way to increase the chances of their marriageable daughters to find an upper-class spouse.

What strikes is the gudilas’ blatant lack of loyalty to the ethnic community they originated from. Obviously, one’s mere knowledge to belong to a particular ethnic community did not (yet) imply any of the moral obligations
to that community nationalism will eventually impose. To be sure, the *gudilas* did not aspire to become “Greek” in the ethnic sense of the word; they merely wanted to belong to the Greek-speaking well-to-do urban elite. To be an ethnic Greek as such was not prestigious. Ethnic Greek peasants were treated by the city-dwellers just the same as *khoriates* – “peasant bumpkins”. The archaizing Greek language used by the educated city-dwellers substantially differed from the dialects spoken by the Greek laborers and shepherds and functioned towards them just the same as a marker of social distinction.

On the other hand, those Bulgarians who did not migrate to Plovdiv but remained in their villages experienced the opposition between urban and rural social and cultural conditions in a different way. The economic activities in Plovdiv, in particular the production of cloak, requiring huge quantities of processed wool, had resulted in an increasing exploitation of the peasants. The latter felt not only exploited, but also despised and humiliated, which increased their traditional dislike and distrust of city-dwellers. In addition, the flourishing of crafts and commerce in Plovdiv also created many new job opportunities, which encouraged peasants massively to migrate to the cities, where they were again treated with disdain. These confrontations instilled in the peasants a feeling of social inferiority, which they compensated by a feeling of moral superiority. Both emotions were strongly related to the way the peasants dealt with ethnic origin.

The emergence of a new urban culture, called “*alafranga*”, and the role Greeks and the Greek language had in it probably exerted the greatest influence on ethnic awareness in the villages. *Alafranga* was Orientalized or Ottomanized French Enlightenment culture, which spread among the Graecophone urban elites in the late eighteenth and in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Politically, it resulted in the emergence of a rudimentary – and, as soon would transpire, stillborn – civil nation. Rigas Fereos Veleslinis’s *Revolutionary Proclamation*, a translation and adaptation of the French 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* and the French Constitutions of the 1790s, is probably the most eloquent expression of the impact of West European political thinking in the Balkans. It was meant to be the constitution of a “Hellenic Republic” Rigas dreamt of. While acknowledging the occurrence of various ethnic groups, Rigas envisaged that

---

the citizens of his republic would enjoy the same rights and freedoms, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. Thus, to a great extent, the Proclamation was, as Daniel Payne phrased it, “a transmutation of Orthodox political culture into a secular vision.” In fact, French political thinking represented much less dramatic a rift with the Orthodox Christian past than one might presume: The secular ideology was just as supra-ethnic and universalist as Christianity. As such, French Enlightenment actually reinforced the “ethnically unmarked” character of the urban elites.

The Balkan petty bourgeoisie might have been interested in participation in centralized decision making on a national level. To the villagers, however, who were accustomed to the kind of grassroots democracy typical of Ottoman rule, the ideology of liberté, égalité et fraternité was not likely to remove the distrust that traditionally existed between peasants and citizens. However, it was the French Enlightenment lifestyle, the most eye-catching aspect of alafranga culture, that affected the relations between peasants and citydwellers most of all. What Balkan society adopted from Western Enlightenment in the first place, in addition, to be sure, to new didactic methods in the schools, was Western fashion and a more permissive moral value system, especially as the relations between sexes and the public conduct of women were concerned. These “Greek manners”, as the peasants called them, were incompatible with the conservative patriarchal values stuck to by the Bulgarians in the villages and defended by the church. Undoubtedly, these patriarchal values were shared by all other Balkan villagers and probably by all villagers all over Europe, but related as they were with traditional values and beliefs, “Bulgarian” apparently seemed to be the most appropriate term to denote them.

While the rudimentary civil nation that emerged in the cities in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century was an indication of increasing political consciousness, the peasants’ nascent awareness of “Bulgarian” values as opposed to “Greek”, which means urban values, initially had no political implications. This changed in the course of the nineteenth century as the increasing social and cultural incompatibility of the city and the village was transformed into an ethnic conflict between “Greeks” and “Bulgarians”, to remain the very core of the Bulgarian national revival movement for decades to come. It was reflected already in the famous introduction to History of the Bulgarian Slavs, completed in 1762 by the

---

11 D. Payne, The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought, Lanham, MD 2011, 56.
Paisiy of Hilendar is considered a forerunner of Bulgarian nationalism — and for a long time “a voice of one crying in the wilderness” — according to Paisiy, the Greeks are “smart and civilized”, but “steel from the simple peasants and rob them unfairly”. The Greeks are “scholars and traders”; among the Bulgarians, there are “few traders and literate and knowledgeable men”, they are “simple ploughmen and diggers and simple craftsmen”, but God loves them more, because they are “simple and innocent”. To Paisiy, “Greeks” and “Bulgarians” seem to be social and ultimately moral, rather than ethnic categories. His advice to the Bulgarians to speak and study in their own language thus partly boils down to a defense of Bulgarian patriarchal and rural moral values.

A later, more telling example of resistance to “Greek” immorality and a defense of “Bulgarian” patriarchal morality provides Dobri Vojnikov’s play Civilization Wrongly Understood, written and staged in 1871. Not accidentally, the proponent of new urban moral values bears the Greek name of Margaridi. Margaridi advises his fiancée Anka not to obey “decrepit old people”, but “to look forward to the progress of the civilization”. (Words in Italics to be pronounced as in French.)

You should imitate us, Europeans, who visit your cities; you should make acquaintance with us and listen to our instructions. You should observe how we behave, speak, sit, eat and drink, and you should behave in the same way, speak, sit, eat and … in the same way…

In fact, Enlightenment culture is not totally rejected; as the title of the play suggests, it is considered as “wrongly understood” whenever it collides with patriarchal moral values. Significantly, Anka’s father Kosta, an adherent of the traditional patriarchal values, is represented as an old Turk, smoking a chibuk (Turkish long pipe) and using obsolete Turkish words. Margaridi’s scheme to kidnap Anka is spoiled by the predictable simple and honest Bulgarian peasant boy Mitjo. Finally, all sing the following song in which the patriarchal ethics of the village-dwellers are celebrated:

It is praiseworthy and respectable
For young people in our time

12 P. Hilendarski, Slavyanobălgarska istoriya, Sofia 1972, 43–45.
15 D. Vojnikov, Săčinenija, 170.
To stick to their very own Ancestral and national name.
Youngsters who cannot resist
To that glittering civilization
Make fools out of themselves; They are guided by frivolity.
Every boy and every girl
Should love one of his/her own kind;
Only a such devotion is capable Of uniting them in a natural bond. Let us stay true in all circumstances To the habits of our own people.
Foreign things are alien to us,
Because they were devised for others.\(^{15}\)

The author transmutes a reaction inspired by mere devotion to traditional patriarchal values into an issue of loyalty to the ethnic community. Or, in other terms, he participates in the creation of an ethnic nation, based on peasant cultural and moral values rooted in religion, as opposed to urban cultural and moral values rooted in Enlightenment. Characterizing the “clash” in these terms is probably an exaggeration: in fact, most cities in the Balkans had a rather rural character and people were reasonably patriarchal there too, while villages were not totally inaccessible to modernity. Nevertheless, the wellknown Herderian bringing to the fore of ethnic identity as a reaction to the alleged universality of French Enlightenment seems to have replicated itself on a more modest scale in the Balkans, opposing the city to the village and transforming the rural patriarchal value system into a basic component of ethnic and eventually national identity.
Ethnic Consciousness in Rural and Urban Environments. The Case of Plovdiv and the Plovdiv Region

Рајмонд ДЕТРЕЗ

ЕТНИČКА СВЕСТ У РУРАЛНИМ И УРБАНИМ СРЕДИНАМА. СЛУЧАЈ ПЛОВДИВА И ПЛОВДИВСКОГ РЕГИОНА

Резиме

У преднационално или предмодерно доба етнолошке нисе могли бити узимане здраво за готово. Иако се у суштини односе на етничке групе, могу да се односе и на конфесионалне, друштвене, професионалне и статусне групе. Поред тога, могу имати другачије значење и емоционални садржај, у зависности од тога да ли их користе грађани или сељаци да означе себе и друге. Етничка припадност на коју се етнолошко односе очигледно није подразумевала иста осећања лојалности и солидарности која су људи у периоду националног буђења осећали према својој етничкој, односно националној заједници. Очигледно, људи нису увек сматрали да имају моралне дужности према својој етничкој заједници, која их је обавезивала да се држе свог матерњег језика, предањских традиција итд. У Пловдиву крајем 18. и почетком 19. века, појавио се нови колективни идентитет, тзв. гудила, на основу пловдивског грађанства, професије, друштвене класе и статуса, a одређивала га је употреба грчког језика као главног означића друштвене разлике (насупрот „заосталим“ сељацима). Усвајање животног стила француског просветитељства продубило је морални и културни јаз између гудила и руралног становништва у селима око Пловдива. Током 19. века друштвена и културна некомпатибилност града и села трансформисана је у етнички сукоб између „Грка“ и „Бугара“, што је остало у самом средишту бугарског покрета за национално буђење у деценијама које су следиле. Изгледа да се познато хердеријанско истицање етничког идентитета као реакције на наводну универсалност француског просветитељства одразило у скромнијем виду на Балкану, стављањем града насупрот селу и трансформисањем руралног патријархалног система вредности у основну компоненту етничког и, у крајњем случају, националног идентитета.

Кључне речи: Балкан, Пловдив, етничност, просветитељство, град, село.