

Николай Аретов *Оксиденталистски страхове и комплекси или един плодотворен провал*

The new interdisciplinary conference of the Bulgarian Society for 18th Century Studies, co-organized by the Centre for Advanced Studies, was dedicated to Occidentalism. The topic was specifically formulated to elucidate the (biased) 'Eastern' notions about the 'West' and to explain the neologism so offensive for the ear of the purist. The issues related to the debate on 'Orientalism' (introduced by Edward Said's famous book and taken up by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit) are of special interest for Bulgarian and Balkan scholars in the humanities. In a world where the center seems to define the production and distribution of knowledge, the peripheries are extremely sensitive to the mechanisms of this domination. Yet there is a reverse side of this problem - just as the West is biased in its treatment of 'the Orient' and tries to impose its domination through literary and scientific texts, the East tries to solve the problems of its communication with the West by building its own (analogous) mental and verbal constructions. They are comparatively less studied worldwide and practically ignored in Bulgaria, even in the context of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. The conference on Occidentalism tried to outline the scope of this phenomenon. The Bulgarian Society for 18th Century Studies demonstrated a long-term interest in issues like image studies and the image of the other, in the ways modernity alters people's mindsets, or the problems of national and regional identities. Therefore we decided to dedicate our annual conference to the nature of Occidentalism and its Bulgarian, Balkan and East European dimensions. The topic provoked great professional interest. Many potential participants from Bulgaria and abroad noted the good timing and the importance of such discussion. Earlier the website of the Society posted links to some basic publications on Occidentalism. Despite the efforts of the organizers to focus the discussion, both the proposals and the reports sometimes strayed from the central set of problems. Many participants opted for their own implicit interpretation of the unwonted term, which varied from some partially explained synonyms of 'modernization', 'westernization', 'the West', etc. to the more convenient notion of 'images of the West' or some part of its parts, e.g. Italy, which allowed the participants to use ready-made texts from reception studies and other similar academic fields. A central problem, doubtlessly deserving special attention, proved to be the 'internal' criticism of Western culture, occasionally expressed through a fictional 'oriental' viewpoint, one of the most eloquent examples being Montesquieu's 'Persian Letters'. Perhaps this could be partially explained by the conviction that Bulgarian, Balkan and East-European culture is not really characterized by Occidentalism. Many speakers implied or explicitly stated that Bulgaria and the Balkans have always been a natural part of Europe. In this context, however, this nominally correct statement poses a multifaceted problem. It contains a measure of Eurocentrism and the implication that what is not European must be imperfect, incomplete, insufficient and derivative. This explains the unwillingness to focus on Occidentalism, which would imply a certain distancing from the West or would at least pinpoint some non-European elements of our culture. Such an attitude was not totally ungrounded. It was amplified by the abundant pro-European rhetoric - mere days after Bulgaria signed the contract for its accession to the European Union. Yet this was hardly the only reason for the weak interest to phenomena of the late 20th and early 21st century. The participants felt much more comfortable discussing the 19th and early 20th centuries, or talking about the Orientalism of foreign observers and about the Orientalist tendencies in Bulgarian and Balkan culture. The intertwinement of the Orientalist and Occidentalist discourses was repeatedly commented on. Far trickier proved to be the interstitial, hybrid character of Balkan cultures. Many participants drew upon Maria Todorova's famous thesis; the observations of concrete phenomena led to similar conclusions. The phrase 'a fruitful failure' in the title was used quite intentionally to continue the provocation in the attempt to discover 'occidental' tendencies in one's own culture. I believe that even when we don't or won't discover such tendencies,

the conceptual field of Occidentalism still contributes to the reflection on our own culture and the world around us. Thus the real debate at the conference was actually fruitful, even though the utopian attempt to reach a consensus failed.