

LOCATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Area Studies, Nationalism, and ›Theory‹ in Balkan Studies since 1989

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first publication

1 Todorova, Maria: *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford UP 1997, p. 3, pp. 184-189.

2 Todorova, M.: *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2009, pp. 190-202.

3 Derrida, Jacques: *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge 1994.

4 Anderson, Benedict: *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*. London: Verso, 1997, pp. 1-26.

›A specter is haunting Western culture – the specter of the Balkans‹, wrote Maria Todorova in 1997 in the opening lines of her influential work, *Imagining the Balkans*. Indeed, at the time, it seemed as if Europe had just exorcised the specter of communism in 1989, that *annus mirabilis*, only to re-introduce in its wake the persistent discourses of Balkanism. Adding American improvisations to an already impressive repertoire, the Balkanist discourses of the 1990s cast the Yugoslav wars (and often the entire Balkan region) in oddly familiar contours of ethnic tribalism, barbarity, and civilisational incompetence.¹

Today, well over a decade after Todorova wrote of the haunting specter of the Balkans, specters and perspectives have considerably changed – but in what way? As Todorova herself noted in a new afterword to the second edition of *Imagining the Balkans* (2009), the processes of NATO and EU expansion have significantly altered Western European attitudes toward the region over the last fifteen years.² Given the changing constellations, it is useful to ask: What kinds of problems are troubling not just ›Western culture‹ as a peculiar discursive formation, but also the Balkans and the subject of our workshop, Balkan Studies? Put somewhat differently, what is the place of the Balkans and Balkan Studies in respect to other discursive and regional and global political frameworks? Could it be said today that, ›A specter is haunting Balkan Studies: the specter of comparisons‹?

As the workshop abstracts made clear, there are a number of other specters that we could address in relation to Balkan Studies: the specter of definition, boundary, and hybridity; the specter of (post-)socialism;³ the specter of parochialism; not to mention the specter of irrelevance. Amid these varied concerns, in this essay I will offer some of my reflections on how ›areas‹ have been identified and approached as subjects of academic study, what structures have been developed to produce the knowledge of ›area studies‹, and how such issues have shaped the field of Balkan Studies in the American academia. I will try to retrace and explicate some of the assumptions of ›area studies‹, namely the inherently comparative nature of regional studies and disciplinary frameworks, particularly as they developed in the United States during and after the Cold War.

I was struck by the phrase ›the specter of comparisons‹ after reading Benedict Anderson's book of the same name (1998), so I think it is useful to briefly outline this context first. Anderson, familiar to most as the author of *Imagined Communities*, later turned to a phenomenon of political vision he called the ›specter of comparisons‹. Appropriating a phrase from the Filipino writer Jose Rizal, Anderson focused on a condition that compelled observers to view aspects of local life in recurring comparisons to their Western counterparts. The original example Anderson adopted from Rizal describes a character who, after a long stay in Europe, returns to his hometown in the Philippines only to discover frustration in everyday life. When looking at local gardens and streets, his mind involuntarily flashes to the gardens and streets he had seen in Europe, producing a simultaneous double vision, the ›specter of comparisons‹. In Anderson's words, the returning protagonist ›can no longer matter-of-factly experience [scenes of local life], but sees them *simultaneously* close up and from afar‹.⁴

What Anderson does brilliantly is to explore this phenomenon further, delving beyond the immediate context to investigate the work of comparative study, of the visions, structures, and practices that shaped the study of southeast Asia as a ›region‹. Along the way, his analysis raises questions that are at the same time simple and complicated: How do scholars come to study regions? What existing academic structures or available political frameworks make particular approaches more visible or successful than others? In relation to our present discussion, how are we to assess the trajectories that have historically shaped Balkan Studies as an academic field even while we contemplate its new and uncertain directions?

Such questions compelled me to rethink the significance of three major issues that have shaped this field, particularly as it developed in the United States over the past several decades. First, to understand the larger context of the Balkan Studies field, considerable attention must be paid to approaches to ›area studies‹ developed during the Cold War, as well as to the variety of problems that have plagued ›area studies‹ since 1989. In fact, in the United States, Balkan Studies did *not* constitute as a separate area studies program; it had

5 Hartmuth, Maximilian: Is there a Crisis in Balkan Studies? A Position Paper. In: Kakanien revisited. Balkan Studies (2009), <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/MHartmuth1.pdf>, 15.04.2009.

long been viewed as a subset of Eastern European Studies, an arrangement that has been undergoing a problematic and unfinished transition over the last two decades. Sketching the political underpinnings of this shift may help us grasp its implications for the state of Balkan studies in the United States.

Second, I should note the shifting position of nation-centered studies, which for a long time defined the kind of work done in this field. As Maximilian Hartmuth noted in his position paper, nationalism in the Balkans has been something of a cliché, a mainstay of journalistic and academic writing.⁵ Moreover, most nation-centered academic agendas seemed to produce lots of narrowly-conceived works with little appeal to outside scholars. Despite such problems, I think this constellation may be changing in a good way. Nationalism studies are an integral part of Balkan Studies, and in my optimistic assessment, they can be resituated in a larger comparative and transnational context.

This leads to my third and last question: the place of »theory« in the ongoing reconfiguration of Balkan Studies. This is a somewhat slippery issue; it requires attention to different contexts in which issues we call theory are articulated and adapted to a variety of needs; moreover, it can sometimes be difficult to talk about theory across what appear to be rigid disciplinary boundaries and methodological approaches. Nonetheless, with these reservations in mind, I would like to stress the question of »theory« as one of critical importance for the revitalization of Balkan Studies agendas.

Area Studies: Formations and Practices

First, then, is the question of how the pre- and post-Cold War »area studies« framework influenced the development of Balkan Studies. Here I will mainly speak of the American context, which is clearly different from area studies in Austria, Japan, or South Africa, but because of certain common Cold War developments, the American patterns of area studies development had worldwide influence that should be specially noted.⁶

It is no secret that during the Cold War, official United States policies were crucial to the establishment of state-funded »area studies« programs, which were distinct academic formations with their own resources, centers, journals, structures, and legacies. Several initiatives of the 1940s and 1950s (some spearheaded by non-governmental organizations like the *Ford Foundation*) provided decisive new resources for the expansion of the study of non-Western societies, while the US government funded an even larger infrastructure through the 1958 *National Defense Education Act* and the 1965 *Higher Education Act*, whose Title VI funding sponsored »foreign language and area studies« at nearly every major public and private American university for the next several decades. (This Act and its programs are still in effect, although its terms have changed considerably.⁷) In practice, this meant that area studies programs, both at individual universities and in nation-wide associations, promoted comprehensive investigations of specific regions, including Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, or occasionally just simply Asia or Africa. These new, well-funded programs took up the studies of vast, often unclearly defined, spaces proclaimed to be distinct and self-evident »areas« of the world.

From the perspective of policy-makers, as Harry Harootunian noted, »the principal purpose of area studies programs [was] to supply authoritative information on regions outside Euro-America (the second and third worlds) considered crucial to the national security and private businesses [in] an expanding global market«.⁸ The emphasis on the production of academic data on non-Western regions, from Southeast Asia to Latin America to Eastern Europe, left the impression that the work of individual »area studies« was by definition bounded and implicitly parochial since, in the words of Pheng Cheah, the *areas* in question – the objects of area studies – were exactly »that which is not universal ... Or, an area is precisely that which is not *capable* of universality«.⁹

Despite this inhibitive, provincializing framework, the establishment of area studies programs had several important side effects. First, most scholars in the United States could develop their own research agendas relatively freely and, just as important, could voice dissenting critique even within the polarized Cold War context. In fact, it is the feminist, post-colonial, and cultural studies of this period, esp. the 1970s and the 1980s, that set the stage for the later critical interventions in Balkan scholarship of the 1990s. The arguments of and polemics around Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), e.g., deeply influenced Todorov-

6 For an overview, cf. Szanton, David (Ed.): *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr. 2004.

7 Ruther, Nancy L.: *Barely There, Powerfully Present: Thirty Years of U.S. Policy on International Higher Education*. New York: Routledge 2002.

8 Harootunian, Harry D.: *Ghostly Comparisons*. In: Culler, Jonathan/Cheah, Pheng (Eds.): *The Grounds of Comparison*. New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 171-190, here p. 171. The integration of policy and scholarly agendas was no secret; as Harvard professor and National Security advisor McGeorge Bundy put it in 1964: »It is a curious fact of academic history that the first great center of area studies ... [was] in the Office of Strategic Services [...] It is still true today, and I hope it always will be, that there is a high measure of interpenetration between universities with area programs and the information-gathering agencies of the government.« Cf. Cumings, Bruce: *Boundary Displacement: The State, the Foundations, and Area Studies during and after the Cold War*. In: Miyoshi, Masad/Harootunian, H.D. (Eds.): *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*. Durham: Duke UP 2002, pp. 261-302, here p. 261.

9 Cheah, Pheng: *Universal Areas: Asian Studies in a World of Motion*. In: Krishnaswamy, Revathi/Hawley, John C. (Eds.): *The Postcolonial and the*

Global. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Pr. 2008, pp. 54-68, here p. 54.

10 Such research found strong support in places like the University of Michigan, e.g., cf. Eley, Geoff: *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr. 2005, pp. 116-117.

11 Harootunian 2002, p. 171.

12 Rafael, Vicente L.: *Regionalism, Area Studies, and the Accidents of Agency*. In: *American Historical Review* 104/4 (1999), pp. 1208-1220.

13 Guyer, Jane: *Anthropology in Area Studies*. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), pp. 499-523.

14 Of course, this is not to say that there was no scholarship on the Balkans in the US before the 1950s; in fact, a few academic figures had already left their mark on this incipient field in the 1930s. However, the fledgling appearance of Balkan scholarship at major American universities was greatly boosted by the new area studies resources during the Cold War. On earlier precedents, cf. Kerner, Robert J./Howard, Harry N.: *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente, 1930-1935*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr. 1936; Robert Lee Wolff at Harvard also published titles focusing specifically on southeast Europe, including a 1944 survey for the War Department under the surreal title, *The Balkans: Many Peoples, Many Problems* (Madison: USAFI).

15 E.g., Jelavich, Charles (Ed.): *Language and Area Studies: East Central and Southeastern Europe: A Survey*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr. 1969.

16 Cf., e.g., articles on the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans and the Middle East by Christine Philiou, İpek Yosmağolu, Şuhnaz Yılmaz, Maximilian Hartmuth, Edin Hajdarpašić, and Charles Sabatos in a special issue of *Middle Eastern Studies* 44/5 (2008).

17 Cf. Kaser, Karl: *Balkan Studies Today at the University of Graz (and elsewhere)*. In: *Kakanien revisited*, <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/KKaser1.pdf>, 20.02.2009, and Kaser, K.: *Disciplinary Boundaries in Question: Balkan Studies in a Globalizing World*. In: *Kakanien revisited*, <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/KKaser2.pdf>, 03.06.2009.

va's *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) and laid significant parts of the groundwork for the later debates over Balkanism.

A second consequence was that the »area studies« framework encouraged many scholars to think *comparatively*, not just within their areas, but also across regions and across disciplines.¹⁰ Indeed, »in time, the vocation of comparison became part of the unconscious of area studies«. ¹¹ As Vincente Rafael observed, »in any and all cases, the regional only comes into view comparatively: vertically related to that which seeks to maintain and subsume it, such as the empire, the nation-state, or the metropole; and horizontally in a relation of complementarity and conflict with other regions«. ¹² In that sense, area studies programs that evolved during the forty years of the Cold War were highly variegated. Countless participants in these developments not only produced vast amounts of »data«, but also coped with disparate »events, contestations, and paradoxes«, sometimes prompting extensive reflections on the conditions under which area studies knowledge was being produced.¹³

Balkan Studies in the US were shaped by these developments in important ways.¹⁴ During the Cold War, the Balkans did *not* constitute a separate »area«, but was considered a subset of Eastern European and so-called »Slavic studies« that included the socialist states behind the Iron Curtain (most importantly the Soviet Union itself).¹⁵ Consequently, American scholarship on the Balkans appeared most often in Eastern European monograph series, conferences, and journals (like the *Slavic Review*) while university research positions designated as »Eastern European« (usually in history), were not uncommonly filled by specialists on the Balkans; this is still the case at most American universities. Consequently, the comparisons that the Balkan scholars drew within the »Slavic studies« framework usually dealt with other Eastern European countries, the Soviet Union, and with the key referent, »the West« itself; the Mediterranean occasionally entered into the picture, esp. in regard to Greece, but North Africa and the Middle East mostly remained outside the Eastern European – and therefore Balkan – academic scope since these were »areas« unto themselves, assumed to be different and separate from other neighboring spaces. Moreover, before the 1990s, US-based scholars of the Balkans very rarely pursued or even articulated meaningful connections or sustained comparisons with other non-Western »areas«.

All this left a profound legacy of division of area studies expertise. In American universities, it is this division that entrenched the separation of Balkan from Middle Eastern studies, firmly asserting Eastern Europe as the »natural« (and presumably the only) home of the Balkan subfield while effectively turning a deaf ear to the deep historical linkages (such as the complex Ottoman and Byzantine legacies) that shaped and tied the Balkan, the Middle Eastern, and the North African regions together.¹⁶ Despite comparative work that cut across some area studies programs during the Cold War, very few scholars attempted to rethink the Balkans outside the usual (Eastern) European context and in consideration of the experiences of other non-Western areas, even the most immediately neighboring ones. In light of this area studies divide, I am particularly intrigued by Karl Kaser's argument that Balkan and Middle Eastern studies should be (re)connected and more tightly integrated if the Balkans are to survive as a viable field in the coming decades.¹⁷

What must be stressed is that the Cold War arrangement of area studies was thrown into a deep and lasting institutional crisis after 1989. In regard to Eastern Europe, seminal events – the fall of Communism, the expansion of NATO, and the growth of the EU in the 1990s – all called for a complete rethinking of priorities and strategies for studying this region. Moreover, the accelerating processes of »globalization« have compelled scholars to emphasize transnational frames of reference that make research confined to a single locale (or area) appear outdated in the present age of intense global flows of information, commodities, and people.

Which Area(s)?

It was during this crucial period following 1989 that the older area studies patterns began to unravel as areas themselves began to be redefined. The first development was the fragmentation of Eastern Europe as a self-evident region, a development that coincided with an outburst of interest in the Balkans as a distinct – and distinctly troubled – region. While overlapping notions of »Eastern«, »Central«, »core« and »new« Europe began to emerge in the wake of 1989, the wars in the former Yugoslavia seemed to spin the Balkans off into

18 For an insightful historical overview, cf. Case, Holly: Being European: East and West. In: Checkel, Jeffrey T./Katzenstein, Peter J. (Eds.): *European Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2009, pp. 111-131.

19 On R. Kaplan, cf. Bissell, Tom: Euphorias of Perrier. In: *Virginia Quarterly Review* 82/3 (2006), pp. 235-252.

20 Woodward, Susan L.: Violence-Prone Areas or International Transition: Adding the Role of Outsiders in Balkan Violence. In: Das, Veena et al. (Eds.): *Violence and Subjectivity*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr. 2000, pp. 19-45.

21 Some of the scholarships from this period is reviewed in Fleming, K.E.: Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography. In: *American Historical Review* 105/4 (2000), pp. 1218-1233. Particularly indicative of the emerging debate about the Balkan »area« were the contributions to a 1999 *Balkanologie* forum, e.g., cf. Bracewell, Wendy/Drace-Francis, Alex: *South-Eastern Europe: History, Concepts, Boundaries*; Schöpflin, George: *Defining South-Eastern Europe*; and Ballinger, Pamela: *Definitional Dilemmas: Southeastern Europe as a »Cultural Area«*. In: *Balkanologie* 3 (1999), pp. 47-91.

22 Economides, Spyros: The Politics of Differentiated Integration: The Case of the Balkans. In: *Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe* 18 (2008); available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/21975>.

23 Cf., e.g., Bildt, Carl: If Europe is to keep growing, it must think big. In: *Financial Times*, 27 October 2004.

their own realm at the margins of a revitalized and expanding »West«. ¹⁸ During much of the 1990s, the Balkans appeared to be on the verge of becoming a widely-recognized and discrete »area« suitable for a kind of »area studies« growth. Intense journalistic coverage kept the Yugoslav wars in the public limelight in the US and Western Europe while policy-makers often used the worst examples of that coverage – such as Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* – as background or excuses for their views, decisions, and policies. ¹⁹ The 1990s also saw rise of some of the most perceptive and critical scholarship on the Balkans, such as the work of Maria Todorova, Larry Wolff, Milica Bakić-Hayden, and many others. Not only were these works deeply influential for a generation of Balkan students (including myself), but they demonstrated the ongoing growth of theoretically sophisticated, keenly politically aware scholarship within Balkan Studies, so that the region and the study of which became not only the object of Balkanist discourses, but a place for their refutation as well (to paraphrase Todorova).

The surging interest in Balkan Studies, both from policy interests and critical perspectives, was in some ways reminiscent of the earlier Cold War formation of area studies: here was an »area«, a loosely defined but contentious, dangerous, and »violence-prone« space subject to major (and costly) interventions of the »international community«. ²⁰ Regardless of the fact that such interventions were confined to the area of former Yugoslavia, the Balkans attracted not only sensationalist journalistic coverage and countless policy-driven surveys and case studies, but also opened up the space for oppositional critiques that heavily drew on (and were themselves reminiscent of) the earlier post-colonial contestations of »area studies«. Put simply, the heated polemics converging on the region during and shortly after the Yugoslav war held out the possibility, however tenuous, that the Balkans might become the subject of a new body of studies of this distinct region. ²¹

Meanwhile, also during the 1990s, Eastern Europe, the previous home of Balkan Studies, entered into the processes of NATO expansion and full-fledged EU integration, thus posing a new problem: how to redefine the *study* of former Communist countries in a new constellation that would reach across the shadow of the former Iron Curtain and link Eastern Europe much more clearly and closely to the West. Eventually, these same processes of EU integration extended to the Balkans as well, but in a selective way that has been dubbed »differentiated integration«. ²²

Today, unlike in the 1990s, EU and American officials do not speak of a single Balkan region, but more often of the Western Balkans as a target of peacemaking efforts and ordeals. Indeed, in the last twenty years, it is the so-called »Western Balkans« – defined in current EU discourses by the magic formula of »former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia, plus Albania« – that have been the »problem region« all along. Innovative arithmetic aside, Western Balkans' implied counterpart, the *Eastern* Balkans, passed by as an almost unmarked category; it is surprisingly rarely mentioned, and even when it is, it carries a somewhat more positive connotation of having made, however awkwardly, the jump from Communism to market economy. ²³ In this case, the long-standing, culturally laden connotations of »Western« and »Eastern« attributes are actually reversed; that part of the Balkans – which was during the 1990s depicted as the most disturbing, the most nationalistic, and the most violent – has now been reinvented under an apparently sanitized label of the »Western« Balkans. However, this re-branding, which formally designates a sub-region targeted by the »differentiated integration« policy, in a peculiar way also reinforces the earlier Balkanist discourses by endorsing the perception of the mostly ex-Yugoslav countries as the perennial »problem areas« that deviated from the normative course of post-socialist transition and sank into the worst excesses of nationalism.

Nationalism Studies: Problems and Opportunities

Because the region therefore continues to be associated with nationalism (which almost invariably carries negative connotations), it is important to note the intertwining of nationalism studies and Balkan Studies. This opens a potentially vast discussion; the nation-state has long held a privileged place in Balkan Studies as the foundational unit of many disciplines, from history to literature to sociology. Given this expansive terrain, here I want to limit myself to two observations.

24 Porter, Brian: *Beyond the Study of Nationalism*, available at: http://www-personal.umich.edu/~baporter/beyond_nationalism.pdf.

25 Since this is not the place for a lengthy literature review, I can point only to a few notable examples of recent works on »nationalism« in (south)east Europe: Dragostinova, Theodora: *Speaking National: Nationalizing the Greeks of Bulgaria, 1900–1939*. In: *Slavic Review* 67/1 (2008), pp. 154–181; Judson, Pieter: *The Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*. Cambridge: Harvard UP 2006; Campbell, David: *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Pr. 1998; Halkias, Alexandra: *The Empty Cradle of Democracy: Sex, Abortion, and Nationalism in Modern Greece*. Durham: Duke UP 2004.



26 Foucault, Michel: *Power and Strategies*. In: Foucault, M.: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. Trans. and ed. by Colin Gordon. New York: Prentice Hall 1980, p. 145.

One: At the moment, nationalism studies appear to be in a state of stagnation, both in their global, as well as Eastern European and Balkan dimensions. As historian Brian Porter observed, after an avalanche of theoretical works and innovative studies of the 1980s and the 1990s, »the intellectual excitement and dynamism that marked [earlier nationalism studies] appear to be gradually fading«. ²⁴ It is now extraordinarily widely accepted (at least among most academics) that nations, national identities, memories, etc. are modern historical constructions, while the works of Anderson, Gellner, Hobsbawm, Brubaker, and others have attained the status of classics. This sense of nationalism studies fatigue adds another dimension to the perceived crisis in Balkan Studies. Once a distinct, attention-getting issue, the study of nationalism in the Balkans today risks appearing banal, trapped in conventional, schematic forms that retrace the existing arguments and debates in uninspiring terms.

However, and this is the second (perhaps more optimistic) sidenote: new social and cultural histories, as well as a growing number of anthropological, gender-studies and other literatures indicate that nationalism studies in the Balkans nonetheless retain vital potential that should not be prematurely discounted. ²⁵ Despite the recent »slump« in nationalism studies, we should not abandon or shy away from addressing various national and nationalist phenomena precisely because they are integral parts of regional histories and societies. Moreover, we can do so productively by developing more fully a comparative, interdisciplinary framework that will both displace the nation-state from its privileged place as the basic organizational unit within Balkan Studies and allow us to place nationalist phenomena alongside other histories, such as histories of sexuality, or the many alternative forms of local and regional political organization, or the highly gendered social dynamics of nationalist movements, or the transnational diffusion of nationalist networks and strategies, and so on. In this manner, explorations of regional national and nationalistic phenomena can continue to build on engagements with theoretical approaches developed in other regions and disciplines, with critical awareness, of course, of the differences in historical experiences and the conditions under which disciplinary and »area studies« bodies of knowledge have been produced. To foster such investigations, I believe, it may be necessary to rethink the place of theory in Balkan Studies, which is the last set of my notes.

»Taking up Theory«

The announcement for our workshop already mentioned a certain problem with situating theory in this field: »the seeming reluctance of scholars to take up theoretical and methodological innovations and approaches as pioneered and adopted in the historical writing on other regions, as well as in related disciplines in the social sciences and humanities«. This remark has a ring of truth to it, although as explained above, a growing number of theoretically-oriented and -informed works have in fact been a prominent feature of Balkan scholarship since the 1990s. Nonetheless, it is important to unpack some of the underlying issues regarding the lingering doubts of a significant number of scholars about the relevance of »theory« to their area-specific (i.e. Balkan) work.

So what could »taking up theory« in Balkan Studies mean today? The noted theory-averseness among some Balkan scholars is, in my view, largely rooted in the earlier social-scientific commitments to producing regionally specific factual information and accumulating distinctly bounded »building blocks« from which a solid scholarly edifice would eventually emerge. Amid this intense production of the particular, »theory« became associated with a kind of universalist, immeasurable, abstract and free-floating thinking that had no proper place in the specifically Balkan locale. By representing theoretical and interdisciplinary explorations in those terms, the underlying and profoundly misleading dichotomy of »universal vs. particular« thus immensely contributed to sustaining the aforementioned resistance to »theory«.

In place of this conception, we could begin to think of theory in more immediate and historically grounded terms, or to use Foucault's famous metaphor, to think of theory as »a tool kit«. As Foucault put it,

The notion of a theory as a toolkit means: (i) The theory to be constructed is not a system, but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of the power relations and the struggles around them; (ii) That this investigation can only be carried out step by step on the basis of reflection (which will necessarily be historical in some of its aspects) on given situations. ²⁶



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27 Alcott, Linda Martín: Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory. Ithaca/NY: Cornell UP 1996, pp. 157-158.

To be clear, this way of »taking up theory« alerts us to the historical and ultimately limited context and usefulness of theorizing. Or in Linda Alcott's insightful restatement:

Theory conceived as a toolkit is throwaway theory, not to be judged by its timeless viability, but by its currency within a specific domain. This is not to reduce all theory-choice to questions of strategic effectiveness, but to recognize the historical locatedness of theoretical justifications.²⁷

Far from seeming restrictive or defeatist, this sense of »historical locatedness« of theoretical reflection, of its inspiring durability as well as ephemerality, could be precisely the kind of revitalizing impulse that urges scholars to keep opening new questions within and beyond Balkan Studies.



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