

# IS THERE A CRISIS IN BALKAN STUDIES?

## A Position Paper

by Maximilian Hartmuth (Istanbul)

first publication

*Every history is by nature critical, and all historians have sought to denounce the hypocritical mythologies of their predecessors. But something fundamentally unsettling happens when history begins to write its own history.<sup>1</sup>*

1 Nora, Pierre: *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Tr. Marc Roudebush. In: *Representations* 26 (1989), pp. 7-24, cit. p. 10.

2 Cf. e.g. the two vol. ed. by Christina Koulouri and publ. by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (Thessaloniki): *Clio in the Balkans: the Politics of History Education (2002) and Teaching the History of Southeastern Europe (2001)*. For the *Joint History Project* and its outputs (publications, alternative workbooks, teacher trainings, etc.), cf. also <http://www.cdsee.org/jhp/index.html>. For the project *Creating Additional Materials for Teaching Southeast European History (Graz/Blagoevgrad/Belgrade)*, cf. [http://www.gewi.kfunigraz.ac.at/csbsc/History\\_Teaching.html](http://www.gewi.kfunigraz.ac.at/csbsc/History_Teaching.html).

3 E.g. Faroqhi, Suraiya/Adanir, Fikret (Eds.): *The Ottomans and the Balkans: a Discussion of Historiography*. Leiden: Brill, 2002; Naimark, Norman M./Case, Holly (Eds.): *Yugoslavia and Its Historians: Understanding the Balkan Wars of the 1990s*. Stanford: Stanford UP 2003; Brunnbauer, Ulf (Ed.): *(Re)writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*. Münster: Lit 2004. The beginnings of the debate must, however, be dated already to the early 1990s. Cf. e.g. the pieces by Todorova, Banac, Ćirković, and Kitroeff cited in the course of this paper.

4 E.g. the *Serbian Association for Social History* (Belgrade), the *International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations* (Sofia), or the group around the journal *Otivm* (Zagreb). For these and other insights on which this paper is based, compare the respective case studies per country in Brunnbauer 2004, passim.

5 As »success stories« have been named esp. the cooperation between Austrian and Serbian and Bulgarian institutions, giving rise to such recent publications as Jovanović, Miroslav/Kaser, Karl/Naumović, Slobodan (Eds.): *Between the Archives and the Field: a Dialogue on Historical Anthropology of the Balkans*. Graz,

It has been a trend of the waning 20<sup>th</sup> century that scholars increasingly felt the need for not only a critical re-evaluation of their sources but also of their disciplines. These had, it was now acknowledged, histories of their own and were thus as legitimate a subject of study (usually under the banner »historiography«) as what others insisted to be the »real« (object of doing) history. This trend has not gone unnoticed among students of the Balkans; the violent conflicts and wars of the 1990s, it seemed, invested such re-assessment projects with even greater consequence. At the beginning of such efforts stood the systematic review of the textbooks through which thousands of youths were taught »their history« year by year. It was soon determined that these were not only repositories of outdated paradigms but also key media for the dissemination of – usually negative, often inflammatory – stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Next came the critical re-evaluation of the scholarly output of historians as such, their methods and agendas.<sup>3</sup> In what follows we shall review some aspects of this debate and seek to pose new questions on the basis of its conclusions on diverse themes such as international communication, perceived mandates of historians, the nature of historiographical legacies and traditions, competition by amateur historians, and the problem of disciplinary parochialism. The aim here is not to formulate an agenda for Balkan Studies as such but to foster a continued debate on the state of the discipline, a purpose also served by the international workshop *Balkan Studies: quo vadis?* on April 25, 2009, in Vienna.

### Local problems and »foreign« interventions

A dramatic decrease in funding for the social sciences at many Southeast European universities after 1989 indubitably made critical work more difficult. Library purchases (esp. for international publications) were reduced, and so was funding for international academic travel (limited certainly already before 1989). While these, some abroad might think, are not per se obstacles to writing »good history«, they did hamper the communication with advances in historical writing elsewhere. Funding from abroad played some role in facilitating research on »unpopular« topics (such as, for example, minorities), and some of the theoretical-methodological innovations that did occur were in fact the results of institutions operating outside the orbit of state-run universities.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, new approaches have been successfully put on the map through collaboration with foreign universities.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, some foreign initiatives have been criticized for creating their own circle of »(politically) correct« collaborators, thereby in fact limiting discussion with immediate (and potentially »incorrect«) peers.<sup>6</sup> It has also been noted that, while translation of Western works ranging from Hobsbawm to LeGoff have been made available in the region's languages thanks to the sponsorship of institutions such as the Soros Foundation,<sup>7</sup> their impact on scholarship often remains marginal.<sup>8</sup> Why, anyway, should one deploy efforts to work on topics like childhood, fear,<sup>9</sup> or on the lives of individuals who left no perceptible imprint on history when »our history« (and, by consequence, »our politics«) is still being attacked from various corners, leaving only the historian to defend it?<sup>10</sup> The social implications of the work of a historian in Southeast Europe are, at least in many instances, still quite different than for those working outside the region. This has been illustrated during the »Batak Controversy« (more below) as recently as 2007 in Bulgaria, an EU member country.

### Traditions and legacies: nationally-nihilist Marxism or nationalist-determinist continua?

In the course of the recent debate it was also found that the label »Marxist« would in fact only in partly apply to the scholarly output produced since the establishment of Socialist systems in the region.<sup>11</sup> This claim was made just after 1989, when some historians expressed their

Belgrade: Inst. für Geschichte der Univ. Graz/Udruženje za društvenu istoriju 1999; Naumović, S./Jovanović, M. (Eds.): *Childhood in South East Europe: Historical Perspectives on Growing up in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Münster: Lit 2001; Brunnbauer 2004. Cf. also Brunnbauer, U.: *Historische Anthropologie in Bulgarien: Die schwierige Geburt eines neuen Konzepts*. In: *Historische Anthropologie* 7/1 (1999), pp. 129-145.

6 Cf. Marković, Predrag J./Ković, Miloš/Miličević, Nataša: *Developments in Serbian Historiography since 1989*. In: Brunnbauer 2004, pp. 277-316, cit. p. 291f. These authors argue that in one case where this has not been the policy, problems between historians of different backgrounds/orientations could actually be solved.

7 Budak moreover points to the positive influence of the Central European University (Budapest) which, in the last couple of years, has trained more than a dozen Croatian historians who have later been successively »integrated back« into Croatian universities, helping there to »transform the direction of historical studies in Croatia«. Budak, Neven: *Post-Socialist Historiography in Croatia*. In: Brunnbauer 2004, pp.128-164, cit. p. 138.

8 On the issue of translations and their impact cf. Brunnbauer 2004, p. 47f., p. 96f., p. 144, p. 187, p. 293, p. 330 (various authors and countries).

9 Here should be mentioned the unusual work by Radić, Radivoj: *Strah u poznoj Vizantiji, 1180-1453*. Belgrade: *Stubovi kulture* 2000, in order to point out to the problem that, due to the language of its publication, it has remained inaccessible to its »natural« target group outside the former Yugoslavia.

10 For the notion of the historian as a servant to »national interests«, cf. e.g. Brunnbauer, U.: Introduction. In: Brunnbauer 2004, pp. 13f.; Todorova, Maria: *Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Bulgaria*. In: *American Historical Review* 97/4 (1992), pp. 1105-1117, cit. p. 1108.

11 Cf. e.g. Höpken, Wolfgang: *Zwischen »Klasse« und »Nation«: Historiographie und ihre »Meistererzählungen« in Südosteuropa in der Zeit des Sozialismus (1944-1990)*. In: *Jb. für Geschichte u. Kultur Südosteuropas* 2 (2000), pp. 15-60.

relief that history could now, finally, be rewritten without the ideological lens; however, it was found that the impact of Marxist thought and doctrine merely applied to some writing in a phase between 1945 and the 1960s, after which the nation swiftly returned as the basic historiographical category of inquiry in the region.<sup>12</sup> Work on the period before the 19<sup>th</sup> century esp. was practically unaffected by interventions due to regime change, scholars largely picking up on where they left off just before WWII. Instead of sea-changes, Todorova has so attested a »national(ist) continuum« in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Balkan historiography.<sup>13</sup> In many instances, their Marxism was merely one of prefaces; achievements of post-WWII Marxist scholarship in the West had little or no impact.

In the academic sphere, one lasting legacy of the establishment of Socialism was not so much of a political-dogmatic but rather of a thematic nature: Here we observe next to the dominant political-diplomatic and cultural-literary orientation of historical writing a greater interest in economy and society, in line with the agenda of Marx's »historical materialism«. While such foci may have provided Balkan scholars with a great potential for a fruitful communication with methodologically innovative approaches to history in the West, as spearheaded by the *Annales*, this was generally not the case. Despite the occasional availability of translation of Western »classics«, their impact until the 1980s was negligible.<sup>14</sup> The traditional epochal foci of Balkan scholarship, the Middle Ages and the »National Revivals«, remained persistently in place.<sup>15</sup> Nowadays, the old universities in the large capital cities Belgrade, Sofia, and Zagreb appear to be far more ready to pick up »new« themes and methods – mostly *Alltagsgeschichte* in its various guises.<sup>16</sup>

### From »truth« and »fact« to »representation« and »production of history«: a successful and universal transition?

A relatively new »threat« to institutional historiography in the 1990s has been the booming work of amateur historians. These publications, it has been argued, often look like professional works, demonstrating in-depth knowledge, but rarely display the critical perspective expected from trained historians. More often than not, they are also the work of »nationalists«.<sup>17</sup> They operate according to the rules of the free market and cater to the emotions of audiences convinced that »they« are victims of various sorts. This trend has been somewhat paralleled in the West, where amateur histories have often provided the »essential reading« not only for a public bewildered by largely unanticipated conflicts but also for policy makers.<sup>18</sup> Once it is realized that »history« is not the activity of »reconstructing the past« as carried out by a class of professional historians but as a flexible interpretation of the past dominant at a certain point in time and within a certain social-political context, should it be so clear that we exclude semi-professional work from our recent debates on historiography? Do they not partake to a considerable extent in the »social production of history«?

That academic history has no universally accepted monopoly on »truth« has been long realized,<sup>19</sup> esp. in the Balkan context with its vivid oral tradition of historical legend.<sup>20</sup> The impact of literature, at times not only purely local but internationally acknowledged (Ivo Andrić, Ismail Kadaré), must similarly not be underestimated; neither should be, as the recent »Batak Scandal« has shown, the emotionally explosive potential of images. As a reminder: When in 2007, in the course of a German-Bulgarian research and exhibition project, the art historian Martina Baleva dared to question, *inter alia*, the representation (!) of the Batak Massacre in a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting by a Polish artist, produced long after the event, this was equated by an agitated public with questioning the massacre as such. The result was a veritable witch-hunt.<sup>21</sup> When the most influential theoretical work in Balkan Studies of the 1990s – indisputably Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* – came out, however, some doubted whether the author's focus on representations had any relevance for those engaged in a perceived »history as such«.<sup>22</sup>

### Yearning for, or obstructing, interdisciplinarity?

Yet another commonly-voiced criticism was/is that Balkan historians rarely dare to peek over their own (discipline's) fence. At the same time, however, it has not been asked whether such can be posited earnestly and absolutely for the vast majority of their colleagues in the West; nor has been questioned the determined focus of the critical reviewers on works

12 This »rule« did not apply to Macedonia, notes Brunnbauer, Ulf: *Historiography, Myths, and the Nation in the Republic of Macedonia*. In: Brunnbauer 2004, pp. 165-200, cit. p. 174f., which after 1945 had to start where other historiographies had been at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Banac, Ivo: *Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia*. In: *American Historical Review* 97/4 (1992), pp. 1084-1104, cit. p. 1084f., noted that Yugoslavia had »curiously« failed to codify thinking on a number of sensitive historical issues, also here this republic proved the exception: »Ethnic processes in Macedonia could not be freely discussed«, remembered Ćirković, Sima: *Historiography in Isolation: Serbian Historiography Today*. In: *Helsinki Monitor* 5 (1994), pp. 35-40, cit. p. 38.

13 Todorova 1992, p. 1107. Cf. the identical assessment for Croatia by Budak 2004, p. 120.

14 Cf. Brunnbauer 2004, *passim*, but esp. the chapters on Bulgaria, Croatia, and Serbia (where this impact has been more profound). Even the work of a »local boy«, the annaliste Traian Stoianovich, writing specifically on the Balkans, was largely ignored. On the matter of translations cf. also note 8. Todorova 1992, p. 1112, relates that in Bulgaria by the mid-1980s an attempt was made to systematically »introduce the main trends of Western historical thought by way of translations [...] Unfortunately, market considerations and the present shortage of paper have indefinitely postponed the publication of these translations.«

15 It must be added that spectacular advances were made, esp. in Yugoslavia, in the field of Oriental Studies. The systematic collection and publication of archival materials, not only concerning the Ottoman period, has been one of the most lasting legacies of the post-WWII period. In the last decade, and undoubtedly in part as a result of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia and its impact on the academia, pioneering works in Ottoman history – often in economic or urban history – now seem to come out of Bulgaria or Greece. An excellent survey of debates in Balkan Ottoman studies is Adanır, Fikret: *Balkan Historiography related to the Ottoman Empire since 1945*. In: Karpat, Kemal H. (Ed.): *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey*. Leiden: Brill 2000, pp. 236-52.

produced solely within the confines of »history proper«, i.e. history written by trained historians at specialized academic institutes of history. An acquaintance with the output and innovations in related disciplines such as sociology or literary studies would be, of course, ideal and welcomed. Far more obvious and far more serious, however, is the shortcoming produced by the failure to consider other disciplines which are, just as history, directly engaged in the study of the past, such as archaeology, art history, and ethnology. In the Balkan context, their relationship with »history proper« is perhaps more intimate than elsewhere; each serves the other as auxiliaries, and each may confirm the other's claims; and this at times in a circular argument.

### Impact and premises of scholarly work in the West: critical counterweight or perpetuating of stereotypes?

Historians, on the other hand, have been reproached by colleagues for remaining relatively silent during the 1990s, with journalists and intellectuals being more vocal in criticizing »history politics«. The constructive impact historians *could* have had on the resolution of actual problems has, it is argued, not been employed to its full potential.<sup>23</sup> Habitually criticizing the nationalist foci in the work of their colleagues in the region, Balkan Studies in the West similarly came to opt for a focus on questions of identity, yet with the aim (and perceived mandate) to deconstruct »myths«. While thus often producing indisputably constructive studies, it has also been noted that the actual impact of this work on a broader level seems to be almost negligible, and on a more immediate level is largely a »preaching to the converted«. Has the quasi-reformulation of Balkan Studies as a province of Nationalism Studies – if such can be claimed – really impoverished academic discourse?<sup>24</sup> While criticism during the last couple of years has provided us with an infrastructure for assessing the shortcomings of historiography in the region (which, it must also be noted, hardly produces anything beyond the confines of Southeast European history), Balkan Studies in the West have escaped a comparable scrutiny so far.

### »Conclusion« or »next assignment«?

Is our field, in sum, in a state of crisis? Moreover, does it even exist; are we talking about the same thing when we do »Balkan Studies«? Is this an »area study« with a truly regional focus and a somewhat agreed-upon body of fundamental literature, sources, and themes, or is this, in practice, really a series of studies of »national histories« with »Balkan« being merely the umbrella label, often only to consider (usually lost, »stolen«, or otherwise relevant)<sup>25</sup> »historical lands« and/or spheres of influence? Are Balkan Studies in the West really as uniform as often perceived or are there also certain schools, pertinent or not to the relationship between a given scholarly context in a given country and the region of study? To what extent are the borders of Balkan Studies sound, or are they perhaps an essentially detrimental restriction we impose on ourselves?<sup>26</sup> These are some of the questions and problems the workshop *Balkan Studies: Quo Vadis?* seeks to address.

**Maximilian Hartmuth** is a teaching assistant and doctoral candidate in History/Art history at Sabancı University, Istanbul (since 2006). He has studied History, Cultural Policy, and Cultural Heritage Management in Vienna, Belgrade, and Istanbul, and has worked in Sarajevo for an NGO active in the field of higher education. His prime area of interest is the Balkans as a space of diverse forms of cultural expression, with an emphasis on the histories of mentalities and the arts from the Middle Ages to the present. Contact: hartmuth@su.sabanciuniv.edu

16 Cf. Brunnbauer 2004, passim.

17 Cf. *ibid.*, esp. the chapters on Serbia and Albania. In Serbia this literature has been called »para-history« by Andrej Mitrović (cf. Marković et al. 2004, p. 292).

18 The typical example is Robert D. Kaplan's 1993 *Balkan Ghosts*, usually mentioned in tandem with the Clinton administration. The manuscript had been declined by various publishers until the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Croatia, which gave it a new *raison d'être*.

19 Ćirković 1994, p. 35, would go as far as to state that »scientific historiography, as represented by professional historians, is not the only or even the most important aspect of the confrontation of a society with its past. There are innumerable ways in which people occupy themselves with their historical dimension, from oral etiological legend universal and ineradicable – historical themes in literature, the visual arts and films to scientific disciplines dealing with individual aspects of culture in the past.«

20 Cf. also the somewhat amusing analogy drawn between ethnic memory in Balkans oral culture and storytelling in Africa by Liakos, Antoni: *Modern Greek Historiography (1974-2000): the Era of Transitions from Dictatorship to Democracy*. In: Brunnbauer 2004, pp. 351-378, cit. p. 353: »The audience is familiar with the myth, and whenever the storyteller changes the narrative the listeners intervene in order to correct him. In a similar way, the ethnic community sees boundaries for historical discourse in a succession of crises, where two senses of history are in opposition.«

21 Bulgarian extremists-populists were convinced that the researchers (»Jews«) had sold themselves out to Turkey which purportedly aimed to humiliate Bulgaria in order to find an easier way into the EU. Though somewhat more moderately – he did not, as others did, call for their murder or indictment – even Bulgarian president Georgi Pärvanov, himself a trained historian, joined in, positing that nobody should be allowed to rewrite Bulgarian history. For a review after event produced by the accused, cf. Baleva, Martina: *Nationalmythos Batak: die Dekonstruktion eines Bildes und die Folgen*. In: *Kritische Berichte* 2 (2008), pp. 21-30. Cf.

also Troebst, Stefan: *Budapest oder Batak? Geschichtspolitik und Erinnerungskultur in der Osthälfte Europas*.

In: *Kommune. Forum für Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur* 25/6 (2007), pp. 83-87.

22 Mentioned, e.g., in Djordjevich, Dušan J.: *Clio amid the Ruins: Yugoslavia and Its Predecessors in Recent Historiography*. In: Naimark/Case 2003, pp. 3-21, cit. p. 8.

23 On this problem, cf. e.g. Marković et al. 2004, p. 316; Djordjevich 2003, pp. 4-7.

24 Djordjevich 2003, p. 4.

25 Kitroeff, writing in 1989, for instance, saw major divergences of scholarship on Greece produced even within the anglophone world. Speaking of an American and a British school, he deemed the latter somewhat more traditional in scope. Kitroeff, Alexander: *Continuity and Change in Contemporary Greek Historiography*. In: *European History Quarterly* 19/269 (1989), pp. 269-298, cit. pp. 274-276.

26 This concerns not the studied region's borders in the West and North – a much-debated question which has really far outlived its »date of expiry« – but rather its borders in the East. Koulouri (Introduction. In: *Koulouri* 2002, pp. 15-48, cit. p. 28) has rightly noted as a paradox that the Turkish element is treated as a *sine qua non* of Balkan-ness but, at the same time, Turkey is excluded from »Balkan Studies« as a matter of course (and also, one might add, from valuable publications such as Brunnbauer 2004. The reasons, more often than not, are stipulations by funding schemes.) Kaser has recently put forward the suggestion to transform (or include) Balkan Studies into a broader discipline covering a »Eurasia Minor« on both sides of the Bosphorus – a term that at least has the advantage of not already being (over-)defined – or, alternatively, a »Balkan and Near Eastern Studies«.

Cf. Kaser, Karl: *Balkan Studies Today at the University of Graz (and elsewhere)*. In: *Kakanien Revisited*, 20/02/09, <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/KKaser1.pdf>.