FROM »BALKANÖLOGIE« TO »BALKANKOMPETENZEN«:
Balkan Studies at an Historical Crossroads

by Wladimir Fischer (Vienna)

Twenty years ago in 1989, no one in »the West« seemed interested in the Balkans — it was the time of the Gorbachev generation. When the Balkan wars began two years later, »the West« was surprised. There was a sudden surge of interest in the origins of »the hatred down there«. But instead of opportunities being opened up for Balkan Studies scholars, including young ones, to take advantage of that attention, what happened instead was that institutional Slavic and Balkan Studies were cut back. In Germany and Switzerland entire institutes were closed down, and in Austria, Slavic and Oriental Studies became targets of the spawning neo-liberal rhetoric which has termed exactly these disciplines as more or less obsolete Orbideenfächer; economic functionaries developed plans to abandon the training of Slavic languages translators in Austria altogether and to recruit them directly at low fares from the Ostländer.

Today, at the end of the 21st century’s first decade, the situation seems to be completely changed. There is a new generation with a taste for things Balkan and with Balkan experience or a Balkan background in Austria — and there is a market for academic knowledge about the Balkans. What used to be labeled Balkanologie is now being sold as Balkankompetenzen. The liberalization, marketization or commodification of academic knowledge and knowledge transfer, as this paper will argue, has not also engulfed Balkan Studies, but especially Balkan Studies. The point is that Balkan Studies, at least in Central Europe, are in a special position when the transformation of the academic system is concerned. We are at crossroads, a historical turning point, in Balkan Studies.

What follows is a brief (and perhaps subjective) outline of the historical development of Balkan Studies up to the current turning point, in order to localize (my) current experiences in the overall development of this sub-discipline and the entrenched connections through which knowledge about the Balkans has been channeled in the past 100 years — and a consideration of possible strategies. En passant, I want to comment on the trans-disciplinary and trans-national character of Balkan Studies in comparison with other fields and propose a relational approach.

Of course, a Cultural Studies approach should also be sensitive towards the meaning of place — for instance, towards the difference between Balkan Studies in the Balkans, in non-Balkan countries, in transcultural post-colonial powers like France and Britain, in the metropolises of Germany and Austria with a continental-imperialist tradition, and even between cities like Graz and Vienna. The following sketch is certainly influenced by the history and perception of Balkan studies in the former Austro-Hungarian capital. However, this should, with all due self-reflection, suffice for the sake of the argument about the specificity of our current situation.

A hasty sketch of nearly 200 years of Balkan studies seems to suggest that there is something that never changed: Balkan studies have always been a sub-field that is trans-disciplinary and driven by specific political and economic agendas. What did change, however, were: 1) the degree of disciplinary compartmentalization, 2) the dominant topical foci, and 3) the institutional frameworks. Following major changes in these categories, we can discern four periods which coincide with traditional historical periodization: before WWI, between the two World Wars, between WWII and 1989, and afterwards – and possibly a new period commencing now.

The first academic formation that considered the Balkans as an entity was Balkanologie, which was dominated by philological approaches. The discursive conjunction of democracy, nationalism and linguistics during the 19th century also influenced Balkanologie. Balkanologists were mainly concerned with ethno-linguistics and historical linguistics, as Balkan languages were still in a process of standardization (a form of linguistic nation-building). Additionally, through the de-hierarchization of culture in romantic nationalism, folk literature and customs became a legitimate subject of academic research, and in the late 1800s folklore had become the second major topical area of Balkanologie. In contrast to that, literature, history, and geography of the Balkans were rather studied on a national basis (and Literature is still not considered a classical subject of Balkanologie).
This changed after the demise of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires as a result of WWI. It was then that historians, too, began to treat the region as an entity. Geographical conceptualizations of the Balkans had already taken root before WWI, but I would argue that esp. the cultural-geomorphic views of Jovan Cvjić developed its impact after the war. Generally, the topics of what we can now call Balkan Studies had broadened. Especially German interest in economic expansion in the Großregion facilitated a surge of economic studies on the entire region (while several cross-regional studies had already been facilitated by the Balkanbahn project in the late 19th century).

Of course, academies of the Balkan national states continued writing separate geographies and histories, such as Nicolae Iorga’s monumental Istoria Românilor. But there was also a side effect of the »little entente« policy on academia that opened up space for trans-disciplinary and transnational academic exchange in the Balkans. In the late 1930s the Revue Internationale des Études Balkaniques brought together researchers like Petar Skok (1881–1956), Eqrem Çabej (1908–1981) and Edmund Schneeweis (1886–1964). This institutional innovation can also be observed outside the Balkans: periodicals and institutes bearing the word »Balkans« in their names mushroomed across Europe.

After WWII the topical foci shifted due to the political and economic revolutions in the region. This brought the new disciplines of sociology, political science, and media studies on the scene. With the advent of Socialism in the region, the »West« sought to understand the developments in the »Red Balkans«. Of course, Western states were also interested in possible leverage in this peripheral region of the »Eastern Bloc«. The second shift after the advent of the Cold War was institutional: area studies centers developed that sought to create synergies between the disciplines. Formerly, scholars had developed their Balkanological approaches despite the institutional disciplinary structures. Now this happened facilitated by co-operative institutional structures (most notably in London and Berlin). Of course, Balkan Studies were mostly integrated in structures geared towards »Eastern Europe«, i.e. the Socialist world. This seems to have been in accordance to the shift which also favored the term »Southeastern Europe«.

The period after the breakdown of Socialism in the Balkans and during the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation was the decade of »identity«: the 1990s. Echoing debates in the international academia, »identity« became the dominant paradigm in approaching the Balkans. This was largely the result of the seeming resurgence of pre-communist, national identity projects, and of the role »identity« has played in arousing conflict and in resolving conflicts. Another dominant, related term was »myth«. Much debate revolved around the issue of abandoning culturalist, essentialist understandings of »identity«.

On the institutional plane, as has been previously mentioned, institutions were closed or downsized in opposition to what one might have expected; the usefulness of Eastern and Southeastern European studies was put into question. A special phenomenon with a huge impact on the development of Balkan studies was the exodus of intellectuals from the Balkans. The academic systems most welcoming or most attractive to Balkan academics seem to have been those in North America. If they had not already been, now many Balkan intellectuals came under the influence of postmodern thinking, cultural studies, feminism, and post-colonial theory. This also impacted the modification of topics and institutions: at least in North America, the share of Balkan natives in Balkan Studies has increased. A free floating population of Balkan Studies scholars has emerged in/between Australia, North America, Western Europe and the Balkans, most of which have not been properly integrated into academic institutions.

That Balkan Studies are trans-disciplinary and transnational in character seems not a matter of course, if one considers that historians from the Balkans have been famous for solely focusing on their »own« national history. But should we not also be aware of, for instance, the Germano-centric focus of German historians? Are not transnational history and European history very recent sub-disciplines that are still marginal in the history departments? And is not the only reason why Austrian history is not so preoccupied with Austria proper but with a wider region to be sought in the residual idea of a Greater Austria that encompasses exactly these regions, while regions like America and Asia, and even Britain, Russia and Poland, to name but a few, have been largely out of focus? Furthermore, when turning from the

8 I will show in a forthcoming article that this was not a resurgence. Fischer, Wladimir: Ancient Myths Did Not Destroy Yugoslavia. Stereotypes and Essence. Why Migrants’ History Matters to the Question of »Central European Colonialism«. In: Gow, Andrew Colin (Ed.): Hyphenated Histories: Articulations of Central European Bildung and Slavic Studies in the Contemporary Academy. Leiden, Boston: Brill 2010 [forthcoming].

9 Iordanova 2000.


12 They are equipping professionals with Kompetenzen, which is not a bad thing; but these Balkankompetenzen exert pressure on the quality of teaching. The new interest driven nature has an impact on teaching. Curiously enough, I had to teach »Western Balkan Languages« as opposed to »Eastern Balkan languages and cultures« for several semesters, a differentiation that derives from EU policies but has no relation with languages or cultures whatsoever.

13 http://www.kakanien.ac.at.

14 http://www.spacesofidentity.net.


academia in the Balkans to »Balkan Studies«, should not we acknowledge the fact that the Balkans as a topical subject has a much longer and deeper tradition of being studied on a transnational and trans-disciplinary basis than comparable regions of Europe, even if this is only due to interests of power that I have alluded to above?

To pick out only three diverse examples of a trans-disciplinary and transnational line of tradition, the Balkankommission of the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Academy which was founded in 1897 springs to mind, as well as a more recent example: Roman Jakobson’s Balkansprachbund-theory. That Albanian was taught at Vienna University’s Slavic Studies department in the 1920s, when the already mentioned Egrem Čabej studied with Nikolaj S. Trubeckoj (1890–1938), among others, should also not be forgotten.11

What I would like to propose here is a relational approach: Balkan Studies have by definition been oriented across disciplinary and state borders, while research in the Balkans has been confined (perhaps longer than elsewhere but with a similar tradition) in such boundaries; but there have been, as mentioned above, notable exceptions. As initially underlined, this certainly over-generalized tour though intellectual history aims to point out that we are now again at a crossroads, a historical turning point in Balkan studies. Topical foci and institutional frameworks are again under a process of transformation. This transformation seems to be linked to the enlargement of the European Union, to the engagement of Western capital in the post-socialist countries and, last but not least, to global transformation processes in academia.

Academic teaching is becoming a profitable business, echoing developments in Australia and Britain. Similar developments can be sensed in Austria: special MA programs are already attracting new students and their money to old and new universities. This is where EU enlargement and academic transformations tie together: Balkan studies courses like the interdisciplinary Balkan Studies MA program at Vienna University are a notable phenomenon as they combine economic interests, the impact of post-war urban-urban migration, and the taste of a new generation for things Balkan, with the Balkan knowledge resources of the universities and the free floating academic scene described above. Combined with the Bologna process, this creates a tough challenge for Balkan Studies — more than for academia in general.

A basic shift in the institutional framework is that private parties – banks – are sponsoring new MA programs and that training is oriented towards professional applicability. This has of course consequences as topical foci are concerned. The new developments can thus be seen as a challenge to the traditional academic system: there are high tuition fees, the courses are catering towards non-academic interests, and all special MA programs are limited in duration. More generally, these shifts can be considered another step from state responsibility to the transferral of burdens to the »end users« (in this case: the students and their families). In other words, similar experiences as in Britain are being made.

However, the new programs can also be seen as an opportunity. First of all, they create jobs for Balkan Studies scholars. To put it in a nutshell: the state is closing down Balkan Studies facilities but banks and students want to invest in it. By historical experience, one must not ignore or underestimate the impact of this interest and there is a remarkable effect on topical foci: this is the first time in Austria (at least in the last five decades), that Balkan Studies teaching is institutionalized both across Balkan regions (except Greece) and across disciplines. Maybe, we are witnessing the first Balkan Studies instruction in the proper sense of the word in Austria.

If we accept that we are in a decisive period for the development of Balkan studies, the question of strategic responses comes to the fore. How can the opportunities of the new situation be used and the challenges be met? How can the trans-disciplinary and transnational trend be taken up? How can the critical quality of teaching and research be secured? How can jobs be made permanent jobs? One answer has been less formal associations that critically accompany the development on the world wide web — I am thinking here of internet platforms like Kakanien Revisited,13 web-journals like Spaces of Identity,14 and mailing lists like Balkan Academic News15 — these strategic enterprises were also an answer to the dispersal and free floating of Balkan Studies scholars. But should not there be more institutionalization? Are not teaching and research institutions the best guarantee that knowledge
is transferred and developed? I would like to propose to think, in the future, both about a more formal research framework especially tailored for trans-disciplinary and transnational Balkan studies, including the traditional cultural fields of Balkanologie and the more recent topical foci, and about new or renewed institutional solutions.

Dr. Wladimir Fischer studied history and South-Slavic languages and literatures at Vienna University and is interested in interrelations of Class, Representation and the urban Everyday. His main research topics are Elites in Southeastern Europe, migrants in the metropolis and Balkan literatures and popular culture. He is currently working on a book on migrants from the southeastern provinces of the Habsburg Monarchy to Vienna around 1900. His studies have taken him to Skopje, Istanbul, Novi Sad, Zagreb, Potsdam/Berlin, Essen, Edmonton/AB and Leicester. Dr Fischer teaches Balkan History and Cultures in the Balkan Studies MA program at the University of Vienna and is co-editor of the international academic web-journal spacesofidentity.net. He wrote a book on Dositej Obradović’s reception with 19th c Serbian elites (2007), and co-edited a volume on Culture, Borders and Spaces in the late Habsburg Monarchy (2009).

Contact: wladimir.fischer@univie.ac.at