

A FEELING OF CRISIS?

Report on the Workshop *Balkan Studies – quo vadis?*

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The international workshop on the state of art, as well as the future of Balkan Studies was held in Vienna on April 25, 2009 to discuss questions such as 1) the limited impact of professional history-writing on more popular renderings and understandings of history; 2) 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; 3) a sustained conservatism with regard to nation/identity as the principal object of historical study in the region; 4) a perceived mandate for the deconstruction of nationalist myths cultured by the regional historiographies by Western Balkan Studies; and 5) the open question in how far researchers' self-limitation to a European geography in approaching things Balkan is sound or, to the contrary, precisely a limitation.

Topic, discussion and the atmosphere of the workshop were quite intense. The pretty tight schedule mirrored the high concentration of input provided and discussed. All the speakers and presentations have been excellent, and though space for discussion was limited, several debates took place about how to define »Balkan Studies« and »the Balkans« beyond geography and cultural essentialism, about the terminology and agendas of area studies, and about the politics of funding and the academia in general.

With his introductory remarks about the current disciplinary, institutional, and theoretical crisis of Balkan Studies, *Maximilian Hartmuth* (Istanbul) prepared the ground for the three position papers of the first session: *Karl Kaser* (Graz) picked up on the debate between Holm Sundhaussen and Maria Todorova on the definition of the, or justification of studying the Balkan area. While Sundhaussen's terminology of »historical regions« and their specific spatiality is in danger of reenacting territorial and cultural essentialism, Todorova's concept of »historical legacy« points out the processuality of the establishment of any area or region. The decline of public interest in the Balkans and Balkan Studies alike is not creating any crisis according to Kaser; what does bring the crisis, however, is the longevity of the concept of historical regions enhanced by collaborative programs drawing artificial and arbitrary borders within a space held together by the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, Kaser argued that if the Balkans were really better defined through a common legacy (or legacies) rather than through geography, there has been a lapse in failing to note that this shared historical legacy does not abruptly stop at the Bosphorus. A gradual expansion of Balkan Studies to a regionally less arbitrary »Eurasia Minor Studies« is, according to Kaser, inevitable in the long run.

The second speaker of the first session, *Edin Hajdarpašić* (Chicago) dealt with the US American historiography of the Balkans and Balkan Studies as a part of East European Studies. Based on Anderson, Hajdarpašić questioned the historical basis of area studies and their implicit assumptions, the unconscious of area studies, and that comparison between indistinct, large regions is actually possible. Area Studies as initiated as a by-product of political interests in the Cold War period are now in a crisis due to transnationalism and globalisation. East European Studies were fragmented and gave Balkan Studies a chance to emerge as an area due to immense journalist sources covering the last Yugoslav war, on the one hand. On the other hand traditional Nationalism Studies of Eastern Europe (after 1989) are put into crisis themselves by the ongoing EU integration that partitioned the Balkans once more and now created the »Western Balkans«. Hajdarpašić pleaded in his presentation for theory with a small »t«; for engaging with theory in order to produce a tool kit for approaching the historicity of any terminology and discipline.

Wladimir Fischer (Vienna) outlined the transformations of systems of knowledge in German-speaking countries from »Balkanologie« to »Balkan Kompetenzen«. While Balkanologie philologically and archeologically dealt with mostly textual sources, translating, editing, and archiving them, folklore studies and anthropology came into play and started cultural mappings of the Balkans in interrelation with local projects of a similar kind. Today, the interest in the Balkans has grown, but has, at the same time, considerably changed in scope. Based on the archive of knowledge from earlier times, diplomatic and

economic strategies for successful political, medial, or market strategies are searched for, and the teaching of Balkan Studies has become a business accordingly, modelled on the British example. In order to secure the future of Balkan Studies as a body of knowledge and not only as an adaptable bundle of strategies and practices, Fischer opted for a new methodical and didactic orientation or even canonization of Balkan Studies.

In the second session *Rossitza Gradeva* (Sofia) gave an overview over the development of foci and definitions of Balkan Studies in connection, in opposition, and in supplementation of Ottoman Studies. While knowledge, material and textual sources create their own dynamics of interest, politics, funding, and social constructs of identity often are channeling institutions and personal careers into different directions, as has best been shown by anti-Turkish politics. In sum, both Ottoman and Balkan Studies are constantly in flux, both because, as well as although sources and state politics contradict each other. The Ottoman history has considerable impact on identity building, and discoveries of new sources, as *fatwas*, for example, depict a transnational globalized society of the past.

Christian Marchetti (Tübingen) discussed the construction of a discipline and institutions in the case of Michael and Arthur Haberlandt and Austrian ethnography, built up as a journey elsewhere (though in the age of colonialism, not necessarily overseas), and with the intention to bridge the gap between urban and rural cultures. He showed that institutional politics followed biographical and individual intentions. Thus, agency in the field of science-knowledge-politics-interest could be redefined as complex interplay of discourses, practices, and power.

Session three began with *Zrinka Blažević's* (Zagreb) fundamental paper on the strengthening of the transnational and translational paradigm in Balkan Studies. Based on essential spatial concepts of global studies and postcolonial studies, she pleaded for the study of social and communicative spaces in, and of, the Balkans in order to meet the sense of crisis created by exclusive narrative strategies and identity politics. The research of dynamic spaces could integrate Balkan Studies in general global studies; moreover, the heterogeneity of the Balkan region could be of special importance for the thorough analysis of transnationality and cultural translation.

Maximilian Hartmuth (Istanbul) strengthened his argument of a crisis in Balkan Studies in his own contribution to the workshop. He criticized the »de-mythifying« paradigm in Western Balkan Studies as the sole answer to local historiographies arrested in nationalistic reflex. According to Hartmuth, it is in part due to the traditional themes of Balkan Studies anywhere that stereotypes of Balkan-ness are constantly reproduced, leaving the region »creatively invisible« on the one hand, and contributing little to a better understanding of the region's non-political, non-ethnicized past on the other. A greater commitment to art and material culture, he concluded, may have an impact on the conceptualization and assessment of Balkan-ness beyond the academia as well.

The fourth and last session of the Workshop was introduced by *Peter Mario Kreuter's* (Regensburg) general and personal critique of the expert's dialogue with mass media. In a rather pessimistic way Kreuter concluded on the basis of his rich experience with TV stations and newspapers that any constructive and academic cooperation with mass media is almost impossible. The image of the general public addressed by the mass media is constructed in total opposition to the one of the academic expert. The transformation from academically based information into popularized and entertaining information addressing the construct of a scientifically rather disinterested public keeps the system of the production of entertainment running, but at the same time neglects both the specific public and scientific knowledge. Thus, Kreuter pleaded for large-scale academically-based media initiatives using print media and Internet, in order to create platforms for experts and the interested public.

Tatjana Marković (Belgrade) presented the last paper of the Workshop on the crisis and the necessary re-orientation in music ethnology. In many cases the discipline is trapped in the service of the construction of national myths. Thus, musicology within Balkan Studies is oriented to the past methodically and with regard to their sources. Music as art, as well as the communicative power of music is still a desideratum in the field of Balkan Studies which willingly or unwillingly are directed by old fashioned folkloristic stereotypes of authenticity and rurality.

The participants of the roundtable, *Maria Stassinopoulou* (Vienna), *John Paul Newman* (Dublin), and *Melisa Slipac* (Vienna) gave short statements on related areas and disciplines: Stassinopoulou discussed the state of art in Modern Greek Studies and the ongoing debate of the importance of linguistic competence (esp. with regards to Ottoman Turkish) which inflict the focus of the whole discipline, its orientation towards Europe or the Near East, towards the near future and the present or towards the past. She opted for the methodical cooperation with Balkan Studies as a vital and evolving discipline. The feeling of crisis, she asserts, might rather be read as a sign of productivity. Newman discussed the construction of crisis and danger by the incorporation of Balkan topics in War Studies that co-creates the sense of crisis in the discipline with political crises and wars. Slipac, finally, talked about the crisis in Slavic philology and discussed its diverse reasons, such as lack in funding and publicity, the gaps in linguistic competence among students, as well as the difficulties in creating a shared profile with Balkan Studies.

