

The Future of Balkan Studies – Continuing the Past or Going Near East?

Research and research projects – and hence the orientation of research designs – is dependent on many factors. It is clear that we cannot simply concentrate on maintaining what has been attained and what is established. While we must keep breaking new academic grounds, our ability to contribute to the definition of the decisive framework of our research is limited. Although one has to respect the foundations of what has been attained so far, we cannot and maybe ought not aim at a simple linear extension of the past into the future given a research field undergoing change like Balkan Studies are. We are facing a situation that challenges the predictability of research processes. The following subjective observations are of relevance in this context:

- 1) *The issue of generations.* This is probably the decisive issue. Having begun my studies in 1974 and graduated in 1980, I am a representative of a generation that first had to struggle with the administrative limits of the research field and is now sitting in the seats of (rather limited) power. »We«, regardless of political leaning and academic goals, had to fight in order to access archives and to be able to conduct field research with as little disruption as possible. »We« saw ourselves as heroes and heroines when we had achieved even the slightest successes in this regard. This academic heroism – and its appeal – has fortunately disappeared in the meantime. A globalizing and transnational youth culture with real or virtual access to more or less any contact across borders does not need to fight that battle. This affects the new academic generation. »We« fought the *furor balkanicus* and a reactionary spirit at the universities. »We« tamed that fury and contributed to the pluralism of research – of course also in order to ease the paths of future generations. »They« thank us our efforts with a strange indifference that consists of not wanting or having to fight for anything, but being able to avail themselves of the multitude of possibilities on the academic and non-academic market. These possibilities are nowadays disproportionately greater than they were only two decades ago. The promotion of young academics suffers from post-modern arbitrariness in a context where financial incentives (stipends, research grants) are more decisive than ever in guiding the research interests of young academics. This happens to the detriment of personal engagement for an issue or region for which there are fewer or less attractive research grants available. The market has never before been so influential on the behaviour of graduates as it is today. The quality of Balkan Studies will in future suffer from the loss of market appeal of the »Balkans« as the Near Abroad. This may sound cynical, but this is largely due to its »normalisation« and loss of its »crisis status«. The major question that arises is, how do we spark an interest in a »normalised« Balkans that can compete with attractive world regions such as Canada, Ireland or Australia?
- 2) *The gatekeepers.* The growing market orientation from which the Austrian universities are no longer exempt increases the importance of the role of the *gatekeepers*. These gatekeepers are those who evaluate, review and catalogue. This does not have to be negative *per se*, esp. since it is justified to hold an academic institution accountable to the society that finances it and to allow this society to evaluate its efficiency. However, there are two types of problems that arise: 1) only some of the sciences are actually marketable. These are those academic fields that can be tied to the interest of the economy, the industry, national interest and global players. It does not take a clairvoyant to be able to predict that academic disciplines that cannot succumb to these dictates will perish sooner or later. Marked an »exotic subject« one day, they are eliminated the next. 2) The international *gatekeepers*, the small group of those that have risen to positions of professional decision-making on academic developments, are increasingly under pressure to follow the octroys of marketability. This is only reinforced by the fact that they have themselves become a decisive part of the acade-

mic market and power can also mean pleasure. The making of a *gatekeeper* takes not benevolent approval, but also the destruction of research ideas. If they want to survive, Balkan Studies will have to meet these challenges head-on. We have to be very clear on the fact that their international reputation matches the position of the Balkan region in the international perception. There is a threshold of ignorance that is waiting to be crossed. This will lead to a massive reordering of academic interest. The order of the day is to bring »exotic« orchids to full bloom – and those who recognize this development early enough will according to the laws of the market be a step ahead and will indirectly push others into the margins. Although I am far from condoning this development, it does have to be recognized in order for Balkan Studies to survive and arrive in the year 2025. A saying that was hammered into us already in early youth, »Money makes the world go round«, has never been as true as it is today. The recent demise of the Vienna *Ost- und Südosteuropa Institut* (Eastern and South Eastern Europe Institute) can only be explained with this saying. Established at the height of the Cold War, this well endowed and internationally recognized institution was closed at the end of 2006.

- 3) *The political context.* Exclusive Balkan Studies outside of the Balkans have a predictable expiration date. This depends also on political decisions. The existence of Balkan Studies has from the beginning been influenced by political as well as academic interests. The intensive Austro-Hungarian interest in the region was a prerequisite for Konstantin Jireček to be given the opportunity in the early 20th century to open up a professorship for Eastern European history. Similarly, neither the Austrian *Ost- und Südosteuropa Institut* nor the Graz professorship would have been possible outside of the framework of the Cold War. Each war has its victors. I must note that I only know of a single incident of governmental intervention into the freedom of research and teaching. That exception came in the early 1990s in the form of a written order by the then Austrian science minister Dr. Erhard Busek, who later did so much for integration, ordering to break off all contact with the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences because it had years before (in 1986) developed a design for a »Memorandum on the situation of the Serbian nation in Yugoslavia«. I cannot remember how my colleagues reacted at the time – I myself regarded it an utterly inappropriate intervention and ignored the order.

The complete integration of the Balkan countries, as well as probably (or possibly) Turkey into the European Union is to be expected in the course of the next one or two decades. It is until this point or maybe a little beyond that Balkan Studies in Graz will be of strategic interest for the university and the republic. After that point, both the research object and the strategic interest will have disappeared. Considering the consistent Greek resistance against EU amalgamation, one can expect a similar situation with regard to Bulgaria and Romania, as well as future Balkan EU members. However, sooner or later, the »trouble spot Balkans« will have disappeared from the schoolbooks and while »Balkans« is today still a hotly debated term, it will in time be gone from public awareness. This will be so because the regions will be much further integrated into European structures and the increasing internationalisation of sciences will sacrifice the main trump up our sleeves – intimate knowledge of the region and its languages – on the altar of Anglo-Americanism. We might find ourselves in the middle of this upheaval in the year 2025. The institute of Southeast European History in Graz will have to face these facts.

It is quite another question whether this development is to be welcomed. On the one hand, representing the discipline in question, as I am *ex officio*, gives me the duty to defend its preservation. On the other hand, however, I must face the developments outlined above and design alternatives in time. The main argument in favour of preserving the discipline is that outside of the realm of national histories, the region has been the subject of relatively little research in comparison to the rest of Europe. It must remain a noble ambition of all those accountable in the sciences to remedy this shortcoming, which is particularly strongly felt in the historical sciences. Austria, whose »Kakanian« past has had wide-reaching effects on the region, carries a higher responsibility in this regard that do, say, Switzerland or Germany. Within Austria, a university like the Karl-Franzens-University in Graz carries

more responsibility that do the universities in Innsbruck or Salzburg. It would be detrimental for this institution to squander the intellectual know-how concentrated there. A small country like Austria is with its few universities not in a position to establish a countless number of medium-range regional competencies and ought not risk its acquired intellectual capital even if it is not strictly speaking marketable.

Thinking ahead to 2025, rather than allowing a competition to develop around the existing sinecures, one must develop sustainable strategies for the future. I believe that in the development of such strategies one ought to consider the following points:

- 1) In the year 2025, the EU will certainly have a different territorial architecture than it does at the time of writing in the year 2007. Today's »frontier states« will have been integrated and European political curiosity, strategy and planning will increasingly focus on the Asian continent. Assuming that the Balkan regions including Turkey will be EU members by 2025, European foreign interest will shift toward the Near East as well as regions bordering on the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. These will become immediate fields of interest, for which there will be a need for academically backed know-how. Furthermore, European interests will touch on Russian, Indian and Chinese interests. There will no longer be a »Balkan politics« as we know it today. Thus what are now Balkan Studies will have to extend their regional coverage in their future development. Such a step should not be understood as a form of »preventative pragmatism« in favour of establishing a »quasi-colonial ancillary research field«, but rather as safeguarding the field's *relevance to society* which it already has to a very high degree anyway. Balkan Studies have up to today provided great intellectual expertise relevant to society, which can be territorially extended in its research focus – given certain conditions. The research fields that have been maintained so far are ideally suited to such growth.
- 2) What has disturbed me most within our discipline in the last 18 years have been the petty arguments over who and which country are part of Southern Europe and/or the Balkans. Which countries and regions have formed a unity of historical events how and when and thus ought to be tied together within one discipline? To draw clear borders between areas of events in »Southern Europe«, »South Eastern Europe«, »the Black Sea region«, »Central Europe« or »the Near East« only serves to undermine potentials for insights, not to support them. Such tendencies will fizzle out in the context of a modern *histoire croisée* as given in the research themes described above. They will increasingly give off the charm of misunderstood, backward area studies. Our discipline is small enough as it is, and has had to expend much energy, which could have been put to much better use elsewhere, with this fruitless fight. I do not make myself an exception here – everyone lives to learn. This complacent attitude of »Well, let us begin by defining the region« nips any creative research approach in the bud. The research questions we have to pose must not simply by definition end at the European coast of the Bosphorus. European and Asian regions share a Greek-Roman-Byzantine-Ottoman history going back several thousand years. To consider the European Balkans without their Asian counterpart, Eurasia Minor, does not really make any sense. Yet we have so far been doing just that.
- 3) The last European professorship dealing with research on the Ottoman heritage in the Balkans and the Near East, which is so relevant for us today, was closed in 2007 in Germany, leaving Europe without a single university institution dealing with this highly relevant research dimension. At the same time, institutions such as the *Forum for European Studies in the Hebrew University* – supported by Austrian, German and Israeli trust funds – are demanding that the appalling division of Near East and Balkan Studies be finally overcome. This initiative is being met with great approval. The University of Graz could thus carve out an excellent position for itself internationally as an institution dealing with Balkan and Near East Studies.¹
- 4) Thus, the main task for the future is not to fight for the survival of Balkan Studies, but to liberate them from the bonds they are tied in by their discipline. This step has

¹ This area roughly includes the European and Asian areas that were covered by the Ottoman rule that lasted approximately half a millennium: Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia and Greece in Europe and Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, Saudi-Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Yemen in the Near East.

to take two directions: 1) as mentioned above, by understanding Balkan Studies as obviously being *part of general European Studies*, and 2) by thinking further and extending Balkan Studies geographically to where they really belong, namely the *intersection of the European and Asian continents*.

Balkan Studies cannot be a sensible starting point for general Eurasian Studies; too many competencies are lacking for such a role. However, there is both in a historical and a contemporary understanding such a thing as *Eurasia Minor*, which stretches on both sides of the Bosphorus, and towards the West, North, South and East of the Black Sea. Choosing »Eurasia Minor« as a research orientation has the advantage of it not having been defined yet: you will find it on no map and it is not mentioned in any schoolbooks. One could phrase the concept somewhat more concretely as »Balkan and Near East Studies«. It may sound strange that after the Balkans have been rediscovered as a »European« region, it should now develop in the direction of being a small-Eurasian research object. However, in this way one part will not only be linked to another part, but it will be tied into a larger whole. When Balkan and Eastern European Studies were started at the beginning of the 20th century, it was a courageous step. The beginning of the 21st century is marked by tendencies of rapid globalization. Growing fields of »Global Studies« and »Global History« demonstrate these developments. I believe that extending into Eurasian Studies by dealing with Eurasia Minor would be a much more appropriate answer to the current developments by Balkan Studies than would be yet another discussion on the question of which river separates the Balkans from Central Europe or whether *homo balkanicus* really exists or is a mere construction.

- 5) There is no need to worry about the future of Balkan Studies limited to the more closely defined region. If there has ever been such a thing as a »Western mission«, it can be seen as almost completed. Some correcting interventions, for example regarding nationalistically directed research projects, will remain sensible in the future. The Cold War is over, the Balkan countries have largely been integrated into European research and university structures or mobility programmes – and where they have not yet been, they will be in the coming years. The arduous individual projects of the past have now been embedded in structured research and mobility programmes. Bottlenecks caused by the so-called transition process have been overcome in most countries and the research and teaching institutions can rejoice over growing budgets. The long-term effects of the brain drain that set in with vehemence 18 years ago are beginning to be covered over. The brain drain could be slowed or halted thanks to courageous initiatives from the region and massive support by countries from Central and Western Europe and beyond; further, the academic establishment is slowly but steadily being renewed. This process also applies to Balkan Studies. While Balkan Studies from the Balkan region itself have always been quantitatively better off than those from the West, we are now witnessing them drawing level qualitatively, too. Thus the Western contingent of Balkan Studies is to be expected to gradually decrease. While Balkan research must and will continue, it will do so increasingly within the region itself. This is a good thing since it also serves to increase the quality of cooperation projects.

The decisive question that must be addressed is whether such a reorientation is sensible within the framework of the Institute for History or whether it might not be more appropriate to establish an independent research centre for Balkan and Near East Studies.

(Translation by Nadežda Kinsky)

Prof. Dr. Karl Kaser has been Full Professor for Southeast European History at University of Graz since 1995 and is Director of the Centre for Southeast European History.

His most recent monograph is *Patriarchy after Patriarchy. Gender Relations in Turkey and in the Balkans* (Vienna, Berlin 2008).

Contact: karl.kaser@uni-graz.at