

DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES IN QUESTION:

Balkan Studies in a Globalizing World

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first publication

1 Schäbler, Birgit: Einleitung. Das Studium der Weltreligionen (Area Studies) zwischen Fachdisziplinen und der Öffnung zum Globalen: Eine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Annäherung. In: Dies. (Ed.): Area Studies und die Welt. Weltregionen und neue Globalgeschichte. Wien: Mandelbaum 2007, pp. 11-44, here p. 20

2 Anglo-American academia prefers the term »Middle East«, which denominates the Islamic world from North Africa to Pakistan/Afghanistan, which shared the destiny of being colonized. The German speaking world prefers the term »Near East«, which usually comprises the Asian territories of the former Ottoman Empire.

3 Ludden, David: Why Area Studies? In: Mirsepassi, Ali/Basu, Amrita/Weaver, Frederick (Eds.): Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World. Recasting the Area Studies Debate. Syracuse: Syracuse UP 2003, pp. 131-136.

4 Appadurai, Arjun: Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination. In: Appadurai, Arjun (Ed.): Globalization. Durham & London: Duke UP 2001, pp. 1-21, here p. 17.

5 Mirsepassi, Ali/Basu, Amrita/Weaver, Frederick (Eds.): Knowledge, Power, and Culture. In: Mirsepassi/Basu/Weaver 2000, pp. 1-21, here p. 2, p. 5.

6 Appadurai 2001, p. 7; Ludden 2003, p. 132.

7 Appadurai 2001, p. 9.

The disciplinary boundaries between Balkan Studies and Near East and/or Middle East Studies were drawn in the course of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th within a framework resulting from European political interests. Arabic and Islamic Studies were considered as the study of the culturally other.¹ At the time, Balkan Studies was conceived as the »Orient within«. The dissolution of the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires during and after 1918 changed the political landscape. Near and Middle Eastern Studies² acquired the flavour of British and French Colonial Studies, whereas Germany was interested in exploring its designated food deliverer, the Balkans, within its concept of *Großraumpolitik*.

After 1945, Balkans and the Near and Middle Eastern Studies changed anew in the light of the emerging Cold War. Colonialism in the Near or Middle East largely ended and was replaced by US control. The Balkans, except for Greece, became parts of the Communist world. Balkan and Near/Middle East Studies in the West and the East were reframed due to the Cold War.

The Cold War is now past. We are increasingly living in a globalizing world, and ideologically definitions of regions are no longer bifurcated. Thus, today, geographic regions are less important than research topics in and of themselves. New research questions may be functions of Balkan regional problems but the answers may have larger implications that transcend the regional issues. *Balkan Studies – Quo Vadis?* A pragmatic response would be to tear down the established wall between Balkan and Near/Middle Eastern Studies.

This paper addresses two themes: First, it analyses the challenges of globalization for area studies. Second, it questions the heuristic value of geographical terms such as »Southeastern Europe« and »Balkans« and the traditional disciplinary division of Balkan Studies and Near East/Middle East Studies. In the conclusion, some consequences of globalization and of deconstructed disciplinary boundaries will be posed.

1) The Challenges of Globalization

»Globalization« is not precisely defined; it includes international forces – technological, economic, and cultural – that drive more and more of the developments in the world around us.³ Fundamental thereto is the reconfiguration of the relationship between capital and nation-state. Globalization creates increased inequalities both within and across societies in a manner that is out of control. States have eroded as sites characterized by political, economic, and cultural sovereignty.⁴

Historians often smile at contemporary attention to the sudden intensification of the globalization; to them this process has been underway for at least half a millennium. However, the present-day acceleration of globalization has led to a qualitative change in its nature. Over the past twenty years, we have witnessed the parallel demise of Communism and popularization of the personal computer. Since then, the social sciences have both contributed to and been shaped by globalization. Area studies have been affected by this. There are good reasons to oppose globalization and its negative side-effects. On the other hand, it would be unjustifiable not to react. The challenges consist in:

- (1) The growing mobility of capital, commodities, images, and among people in different parts of the world has had important implications for area studies.⁵
- (2) Territoriality has become more fluid, cultural boundaries are moving, and disciplines are shifting. The intellectual environment is also changing. Global culture is superseding cultural areas, regions, and territoriality in the theory of cultural change. Cultural change and differentiation are spilling out of boundaries that once seemed to be eternal.⁶
- (3) The idea of stable »culture areas« as projected by Western cartography – i.e large civilizational land masses each with a different relationship to Europe – has faded. But, in the age of globalization, how does the world look from other locations? Areas are not facts but artifacts of our interests and our fantasies.⁷

8 Ludden, David: Area Studies in the Age of Globalization. In: *Frontiers. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* (2000), pp. 1-22.

9 Szanton, David L.: The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States. University of California Press/University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection, Ed. Vol. 3 (2003). <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/3/1>

10 Green, Sandra E.: The Multiple Worlds of African Studies. In: *Mirsepassi/Basu/Weaver* 2003, pp. 137-147, here p. 139.

11 Szanton 2003.

12 Ibid.

- (4) Knowledge attached in and for itself to any specific theory is archaic and limited. Old fashioned area studies obstruct the movement of knowledge across borders. Globalization will obviously not provide a stable and comfortable intellectual or institutional home for area studies scholarship.⁸
- (5) Transnationalism as one element of globalization is also challenging the traditional conception of area studies. Especially the variety and increasing international diasporas and networks is emphasizing the importance of new social and cultural formations cross-cutting area boundaries.⁹

How did the international area studies community react to these challenging questions until now? At first glance, the tendency appears to be to reformulate traditional area studies into a new form which poses the research question into the foreground and the traditional areas into the background. This is especially the case with postcolonial as well as with global and globalization studies. Beyond this massive growing of postcolonial and global as well as globalization studies, there is wide agreement that area studies have to adjust themselves to these emerging trends by:

- A massive effort to establish cooperative links among organizations that emphasize the need to examine the relationships that exist between the local and the global as well as among world areas.¹⁰
- The encouragement of more comparative and thematic research across areas. This would help to determine exactly how different or interconnected areas are really are or, to be cautious, imagined.¹¹
- The encouragement of cross-area comparative research seeking broad generalizations and cross-culturally robust theory.¹²

2) The Balkans, the Near East or both?

For many decades, Balkan or Southeast European studies have been firmly institutionalized as if the world around the region would never change. In 1998, however, one decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a big debate was inaugurated in Germany about the future of area studies that spilled over from a debate in the US that had began a few years earlier. The end of the East- and Southeast European studies and their re-integration into the component disciplines comprising them was announced. Area studies were accused of being methodologically and theoretically insufficient and backward.¹³

One year later, Holm Sundhaussen reacted by defining a »historical region« called Southeastern Europe through the specific overlap or interaction of historical structures, especially produced in the period of the Ottoman Empire. This was not the first attempt to define Southeastern Europe as a region specifically compared to the rest of Europe, and implicitly, also specific if compared to the Near East.¹⁴ Maria Todorova reacted promptly with the charge of »essentialism« and countered with her concept of »historical legacy«, which will be discussed below.¹⁵ Sundhaussen's concept was obviously more attractive to German academia because it paved the way to slice Europe into clear-cut historic regions and provides a seemingly new orientation: southeast, northwest, central, central-east, central-west etc. Even the Black Sea-region did not escape this new mania of slicing Europe geographically into historical regions.¹⁶

Todorova, however, has been neglected because of her rejection of geographical parcelization. She introduces the category of historical legacy as a heuristic device in describing historical regions. She argues that historical legacy avoids the danger of essentialism, allows more clearly articulate the dynamism of historical change than structural categories such as border, space, and territoriality. The category retains the valuable features of the analyses of spatiality and makes it historically more specific. Another advantage, according to Todorova, is that elements of the historical past are not consciously singled out and encompass everything that is handed down from the past.¹⁷ Concretely, she applies the category of legacy to Eastern Europe and the Balkans. According to Todorova, the most important political legacies of the Balkans are the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and the Communist ones.¹⁸

Thus we have basically two different concepts and one big problem: the arbitrary classification and »ghetto-ization« of the Balkans within Europe. For both the concepts, the

13 Baberowski, Jörg: Das Ende der Osteuropäischen Geschichte. Bemerkungen zur Lage einer geschichtswissenschaftlichen Disziplin. In: *Osteuropa. Zeitschrift für Gegenwartsfragen des Ostens* 48/8-9 (1998), pp. 784-799.

14 Sundhaussen, Holm: Europa balcanica. Der Balkan als historischer Raum Europas. In: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 25 (1999), pp. 626-653.

15 Todorova, Maria: Der Balkan als Analysekategorie. Grenzen, Raum, Zeit. In: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002), pp. 470-492; Todorova, Maria: Spacing Europe: What is a Historical Region? In: *East Central Europe/ECE* 32/1-2 (2005), pp. 59-78.

16 Troebst, Stefan: Le Monde méditerranéen – Südosteuropa – Black Sea World. Geschichtsregionen im Süden Europas. In: Schenk, Frithjof B./Winkler, Martina (Eds.): *Der Süden. Neue Perspektiven auf eine europäische Geschichtsregion*. Frankfurt & New York: Campus 2007, pp. 49-73.

17 Todorova 2005, p. 65, p. 68.

18 Ibid. 69.

more than half-millennial dominance of the Ottoman Empire is crucial; for Todorova the Balkans are Ottoman legacy. It is obvious, however, that the Near East is also an Ottoman legacy, perhaps an even more pronounced one. How can the narrow Bosphorus has the magic power to separate one joint historical legacy into two, and how can the Bosphorus separate one historical region from the other although they shared more than half a millennium of Ottoman history, about one thousand years of Byzantine history, and about another thousand years of Roman, Hellenistic, and Greek history? Why do we neglect »European-ness« and what had been shaped in the Balkans and in the Near East – regions that are considered half-European in the case of the former and non-European in the case of the latter today?

Obviously, the period of Communism made us Balkanists and Southeast-Europeanists blind to the world beyond the ideological frontiers. After 1989, we had to reshape our studies – and we did it, but only half-heartedly. This becomes clear if we consider another argument by Todorova, according to which the break with the Ottoman legacy was allegedly completed by the end of the WWI. This holds obviously not true for the Near East, nor for Turkey, and not even for the Balkans. Colonialism and its legacy in the Near East, Kemalism and its legacy in Turkey, Communism and its legacy in the Balkans, all seemingly have erased the Ottoman legacy. This, however, is simply not true. The truth is that we have neglected to investigate the common legacy that is still at work. I want to mention only a few of these elements, besides the trivial observation that the cuisine in the region, although nationalized and internationalized, shares many ingredients.

Most important is the tributary mode of domination in Little Eurasia, which is how I choose to call the two regions of the Balkans and the Near East. This legacy weighs heavy and overshadows the relation between citizens and the state with its institutions to a high degree. The population of the post-Ottoman states is united in its mistrust vis-à-vis the state. At the first glance, this is less astonishing for the Near East than for the Balkans. Greece, for instance, had received independence from the Ottoman Empire almost two centuries ago and would have been in a position to establish a climate of mutual trust between the state's institutions and its citizens. The result is not convincing, however. The societies of the Communist states experienced a state in form of an ideologically dressed-up despotism and therefore the experience was a rather bad one. However, what should people in contemporary Romania or Bulgaria think about prime ministers, ministers, and members of parliaments proven to be corrupt but not indicted? In many states of the Near East such cases of reprobate behavior as facilitated by authoritarian structures usually do not become public but do not contribute to confidence-building regardless.

Most of the following observations are derived from the observations above: unstable democratic structures or at least not deeply rooted democratic structures as well as authoritarian regimes; weakly developed civil societies; over-administrated states, the apparatuses of which work inefficiently; autonomous state organs, which are controlled by society only insufficiently; the similarly strong role of the military, which has to contribute to the control of society especially in the Near East; patriarchal gender relations, which have been questioned only in the elite strata, mirroring the situation in the late Ottoman Empire; finally, the role of Islam in society, which is unevenly distributed over the region.

Conclusions

The contemporary world of globalization is seemingly forming a single and unified environment for intellectual ambition and science. But global networks have also differentiated the contexts of human activity, experience, and knowing. Globalization and diversification move together. Compiling data on all areas of the world remains fundamental for knowing the world, and even for understanding globalization itself,¹⁹ even if these areas have lost their former distinctiveness.

Area studies scholarship has to be internationalized. Putting globalization in the perspective of all the various regions of the world rather than seeing it as a single process reveals a vast patchwork of world territories which have been both increasingly integrated and differentiated during the long history of globalization. It might be a good way to begin expanding the scope of newly conceived area studies and collaborations among area studies programs in the context of globalization.²⁰

19 Ludden 2003, p. 132.

20 Szanton 2003.

The concept of the historical region »Southeastern Europe« with its implicit ghetto-ization of the region is contradictory to the international interventions promoting a revitalization of area studies. Balkan Studies is not yet in a crisis, but this concept will create a crisis if we follow this path without reflection. The concept of the historical region is no longer an appropriate heuristic device for the world and for the community of area students post-1989. There is an urgent need for a re-thinking of Balkan Studies as well as of Middle/Near East Studies. The historically grown division of these two big fields with all their sub-divisions is contradictory to what Todorova would call historical legacy.

The traditional disciplinary order cannot be revised from the scratch. The first step into the right direction is to recognize that there exists a problem in the first place. A second step may be the revision of training programs; the most important point of this step consists in the study of Balkan *and* Near East history and culture as well as languages which represent Little Eurasia as extensive as possible. A new type of scholars and a new job description is therefore needed, which is not an easy task.

The study of Little Eurasia would provide a proper basis for putting globalization in the perspective of various regions of the world and to react to the forces of globalization. We have to have in mind that not only the region per se creates our research questions; looking for regional specifics is not yet outdated but this cannot remain the final goal of our endeavours. Global studies in general and global history studies in specific aim at the resolution of questions located on a global level. If we are not able to respond to such questions, we will fail – not in 10, maybe not in 20 but certainly in 30 years.

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