

FROM »BALKANOLOGIE« TO »BALKAN-KOMPETENZEN«:

Balkan Studies at an Historical Crossroads

by Wladimir Fischer (Vienna)

first publication

1 Some of the many publications from 1992 reflected the atmosphere in their titles: Šunjić, Melita: *Woher Der Haß? Kroaten und Slowenen Kämpfen Um Selbstbestimmung.* Wien et al.: *Amalthea* 1992; Ramet, Sabrina Petra: *Balkan Babel. Politics, Culture and Religion in Yugoslavia.* Boulder/San Francisco, Oxford: Westview 1992; Alida Bremer (Ed.): *Jugoslawische (Sch)Erben. Probleme und Perspektiven.* Osnabrück, Münster: Fibre 1993.

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«. ¹ 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 *Orchideenfächer*; 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 a 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 transcontinental 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*).

2 Cf. for example Forbes, Nevill/Toynbee, Arnold Joseph/Mitrany, David/Hogarth, D.G. (Eds.): *The Balkans; a History of Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, Rumania, Turkey*. Oxford: Clarendon 1915.; Roth, Karl: *Geschichte der christlichen Balkanstaaten (Bulgarien, Serbien, Rumänien, Montenegro, Griechenland)*. Leipzig: Göschen 1907; Friedrich, Fritz: *Die christlichen Balkanstaaten in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Eine Geschichtliche Einführung*. München: Beck 1916; André, Louis: *Les États Chrétiens des Balkans depuis 1815. Roumanie, Bulgarie, Serbie, Montenegro, Grèce*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan 1918.

3 Freytag, Gustav: *Neue Bahnprojekte in Oesterreich-Ungarn und den Balkanstaaten Auf Grund d. Regierungsvorlagen i. Österreich. Abgeordnetenhaus u. i. Bosn. Landtage, Sowie and. Authent. Materials*. Wien: G. Freytag & Berndt 1914; Stojanoff, A.: *Die Handelspolitische Situation der Balkanstaaten Gegenüber Österreich-Ungarn dargestellt auf der Grundlage des Bulgarisch-Serbischen Zollunionvertrages vom 9. Juli 1905 (N. St.)*. Wien: Perles 1914.

4 Lendvai, Paul: *Der Rote Balkan. Zwischen Nationalismus und Kommunismus*. Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer 1969.

5 Hajdarpašić, Edin: *Locations of Knowledge. Area Studies, Nationalism, and ›Theory‹ in Balkan Studies since 1989*. In: *Kakanien Revisited*, <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/EHajdarpaasic1.pdf>, 17.07.2009, p. 2.

6 Iordanova, Dina: *Are the Balkans Admissible? The Discourse on Europe*. In: *Balkanistica* 13, (2000), pp. 1-34.

7 Cf. for instance Engman, Max (Ed.): *Ethnic Identity in Urban Europe*. Vol. 8: *Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe, 1850–1940*. New York: New York UP 1992; Smith, Anthony D.: *National Identity. Ethnonationalism in Comparative Perspective*. Reno: University of Nevada Pr. 1991; Giddens, Anthony: *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford/Cal.: Stanford UP 1991; Hall, Stuart: *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. In: Rutherford, J. (Ed.): *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart 1990, pp. 222-237; Wallerstein, Immanuel:

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.² Geographical conceptualizations of the Balkans had already taken root before WWI, but I would argue that esp. the cultural-geomorphological views of Jovan Cvijić 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).³

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 *Révue 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«. ⁴ 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.⁵ 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«. ⁶

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,⁷ »identity« became the dominant paradigm in approaching the Balkans. This was largely the result of the seeming resurgence of pre-communist, national identity projects,⁸ 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«. ⁹

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 not we 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?¹⁰ Furthermore, when turning from the

The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity. In: Sociological Forum 2/2 (1987); pp. 373-388; Rex, John: Race and Ethnicity. Milton Keynes: Open University Pr. 1986.

8 I will show in a forthcoming article that this was not a resurgence. Fischer, Wladimir: Ancient Myths Did Not Destroy Yugoslavia. Stereotypes in Yugoslav Media Struggles of 1945–52 and 1989 Revisited. In: Živković, Marko/Pavlović, Srdja (Eds.): Transcending Fratricide: Political Mythologies, Reconciliations, and the Uncertain Future in the Former Yugoslavia. Leiden, Boston: Brill 2010 [forthcoming].

9 Iordanova 2000.

10 Fischer, Wladimir: Of Crescents 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 2007, pp. 61-101.

11 Hafner, Stanislaus: Fürst Nikolaj Sergeevič Trubetzkoy (Trubeckoj) in Wien. In: Opera Slavica Minora Linguistica. N.S. Trubetzkoy, Ed. Stanislaus Hafner, Franz Wenzel Mareš, and M. Trummer. Wien: ÖAW 1988, pp. IX-XXXVII.

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>.

15 <http://www.seep.ceu.hu/balkans/index.html>.

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 Eqrem Çabej studied with Nikolaj S. Trubeckoj (1890–1938), among others, also should 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,¹² 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 News*¹⁵ — 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



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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.



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