

GLOBALIZING THE BALKANS: Balkan Studies as a Transnational/Translational Paradigm

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first publication

1 Fleming, Katherine E.: *Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography*. In: *American Historical Review* 105/4 (2000), pp. 1218-1233.

2 Bakić-Hayden, Milica: *Nesting Orientalism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia*. In: *Slavic Review* 54/4 (1995), pp. 917-931.

3 Bachmann-Medick, Doris: *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*. Reinbek: Rowohlt 2006.

4 Löw, Martina: *Raumsoziologie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2001.

5 Massey, Doreen: *For Space*. London: Sage 2005.

6 Bourdieu, Pierre: *Language and Symbolic Power*. Trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Anderson: Cambridge UP 1991.

Along with growing scholarly interest in distant non-European cultures, Balkan Studies arose within the Western episteme in the early 19th century. It provided civilized and progressive Western Europe with an »other«, conceptualized in terms of deficiencies and backwardness. Balkan Studies was from the beginning determined by an ambivalent »intimate estrangement«, to borrow a term from K.E. Fleming,¹ this stemming from a disturbing similarity between Europe and its Balkan periphery. The Balkans were perceived as incomplete and anomalous, yet it was acknowledged that they possessed marks of European civilization. The politics of the discipline was based on similar presumptions. Balkan Studies were constituted under the tacit premise of political, economic, and cultural (sub)mission. In other words, their main goal was to appropriate cognitively but, at the same time, expropriate epistemologically the Balkan subaltern, making the region a perfect testing ground for the current Western modernization project.

The emergent and/or consolidating intellectual elites in the region have always suffered from a Balkan inferiority complex, which determined their own cultural self-perception and identity to a large degree. Balkan national historiographies mostly reproduced historicist and later, modernist grand narratives. This often went hand in hand with projecting the historical blame for their own underdevelopment onto the notorious Ottoman »arch-enemy«. After the Cold War, a new turn in Balkan Studies emerged from the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia during the 1990's, providing the West with a new civilizing and pacifying mission. That trend brought about two divergent responses in the region: While some recognized Balkan Studies as a possibility for the emancipation from nationalist historiography (e.g. Maria Todorova), and as the promotion of one's academic career, others persisted on their rejection, referring to Balkans studies only as an act of »subjectivational practice«² for the orientalizing of others and the occidentalizing of the selves. The best example of this kind of epistemic gesture, which naturally results in a self-marginalization, can be seen in Croatian historiography which has stubbornly refused any correlation with the Balkans, engendering a shabby self-image of Croatia as an unrecognized bulwark of Christianity and a bedrock of the European civilization.

Alongside two serious challenges – the rapidly vanishing interest in the »trouble spot Balkans« caused by the ongoing EU integration process and the rapid shifting of theoretical paradigms caused by numerous recent »turns«³ in the Humanities and Social Sciences – the future of Balkan Studies largely depends on whether or not it will be able to overcome a deep gap between »internal« and »external« epistemological positions and politics of the discipline. This issue is of vital importance since the first seriously suffer from theoretical and methodological insufficiency and interpretative parochialism, while the second are more than prone to homogenizing and essentializing of its own subject, often conjoined with latent academic and cultural imperialism.

In the following pages I propose a possible strategy for the reformation of Balkan Studies, making them more relevant and efficient in cognitive, explanatory, and practical terms. Any such project must start with the reconceptualization of the term »Balkan«. Instead of being a criterion for symbolic inclusion/exclusion, the term should be turned into a flexible, dynamic, and relational heuristic concept. This kind of epistemic gesture becomes possible within the »spatial turn« paradigm which enables and promotes a critical, multi-perspective and self-reflexive thinking about space. From the perspective of the sociology of space, for instance, space is not viewed as a static physical given which merely functions as a container, but as a complex social product constantly reproducing itself in the double act of synthesis and spacing, thus establishing a relational order of material goods and social beings.⁴ On the other hand, post-modern geography conceptualizes space as a dynamic network made up of contingent simultaneity of heterogeneous historical trajectories densely interwoven with the asymmetrical relations of power.⁵ This stance makes possible the denaturalizing and de-ontologizing of traditional regionalist discourses which establish and legitimize regional categories by the performative power of discursive objectification.⁶ In that manner, discourse about regions can be disclosed in its true nature, namely as an arbitrary construction and classification with the main aim of enabling and facilitating scholarly communication.

7 Foucault, Michel: On Other Spaces. Trans. by Jan Miskowicz. In: *Diacritics* 16 (1986), pp. 22-27.

8 Kaser, Karl: *Balkan Studies Today at the University of Graz (and elsewhere)*. In: <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/KKaser1.pdf>.

9 Bjelić, Dušan: Introduction: *Blowing Up the »Bridge«*. In: Bjelić, Dušan/Savić, Obrad (Eds.): *Balkan as Metaphor*. Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Pr. 2002, pp. 1-22.

10 Mignolo, Walter: *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. New Jersey: Princeton UP 2000.

On that account, drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia,⁷ a site capable of comprising several juxtaposed spaces that are by themselves incompatible, I propose a reconceptualization of the Balkans as an interstitial zone of interaction, a space of permeation and overlapping, where individual and collective identities have constantly been (re)created in the game of attraction and rejection. If conceptualized as a permeable and liminal »in-between space« of religious, cultural, economic, and social entanglements, coexistences and transgressions in a *longue durée*, a Balkan heterotopia would be a contested space of constant reconfigurations of various symbolic and political identities and loyalties, as well as ideologies, institutions, manifestations, and representations of authority and power. Moreover, because Balkan relational identities were built upon the principle of reciprocal inclusiveness, an examination of the Balkan heterotopia would provide valuable insight into the complex construction processes of the multiple ethnic, confessional, professional, class, gender, and other identities, as well as into the forms and strategies of social, political and cultural interactions, segmentations, and conflicts. For all these reasons, the Balkan heterotopia as a space of (im)possible coexistence of hybrid social, cultural, political, and economic forms might render its own geo-political marginality into an epistemological centrality, esp. from the perspective of a heightened interest of current social and cultural theorists in phenomena of difference.

Another useful consequence of a »Balkans as heterotopia« heuristic model is that it is characterized by open and flexible territorial boundaries which can be re-drawn over and again depending on specific research purposes. Together with its internal nodal structure which enables the integration of the Balkans into the global processes of transfers, exchanges and interactions, this »flexible boundaries model« could make possible the extension of Balkan Studies into the Eurasian or even into Global Studies, as Kaser suggests.⁸

In order to examine such a reconfigured spatial and cultural geography of the Balkans, it is necessary to construct appropriate heuristic devices, a sort of »methodology for liminal space«⁹ which will not be founded on a static and essentializing »identity-thinking« but on dynamic and transgressive »border-thinking«.¹⁰ A decisive impetus for such a task can be found within Balkan Studies itself, since from the onset it has been an ensemble of disciplines – such as ethnology, philology, history, and geography – unified around a common research topic. A vital precondition for constructing a new transnational and translational Balkan heterotopia is the transcendence of mono-disciplinary approaches and mono-national perspectives which are currently major obstacles to a further development of Balkan Studies.

For that reason, the future of the Balkan Studies should be in the sign of translation, on epistemological, critical, and phenomenological levels. Translational epistemology, as a meta-theoretical offspring of a recent »translational turn«, should encourage a creative exchange and adaptation of theoretical models, heuristic concepts, and methodological procedures amongst various disciplines within Balkan Studies, and post-colonial theory, translation studies, and global studies. Moreover, the appropriate epistemology for the »Balkan heterotopia« should have a transnational character which would manifest itself in a new approach to the phenomenon of difference. From the transnational perspective, difference is no longer a despised and threatening by-product of non-homogenized national histories and cultures, but a complex albeit not fully understandable quality constantly reproducing itself in the processes of cultural transfers and transitions. In other words, the main cognitive and explanatory aim of transnational epistemology is not a search for unique, invertebrate cultural roots but for wandering and intersected cultural routes.

As far as research topics are concerned, »reformed« Balkan Studies should focus on the phenomena of cultural, political, and economic exchanges, transfers, and transactions conditioned by various social, political and institutional factors, structures and processes which operate within dynamic fields of hierarchical and asymmetrical power relations. From a methodological point of view, it is of crucial importance to analyse translation processes simultaneously on two interdependent axes: vertically, in terms of creative transfers of exemplary European models in the regional domain, and horizontally, as an interactive exchange of material and symbolic artefacts and practices between various local ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. Accordingly, what must be stressed is a relative autonomy of the hybrid forms of »local knowledge« which has emerged as a result of selection processes and the dynamic interdependence of multiple social, economic, and cultural interactions. In this respect, »transdifference theory«, as elaborated by Helmbrecht Breinig and Klaus

- 11 Breinig, Helmbrecht/Lösch, Klaus: Difference and Transdifference. In: Breining, H./Gebhardt, J./Lösch, K. (Eds.): *Multiculturalism in Contemporary Societies: Perspectives on Difference and Transdifference*. Erlangen: Universitätsbund 2002, pp. 11-36; Allolio-Näcke, Lars/Kalscheuer, Britta/Manzeschke, Arne (Eds.): *Differenzen anders denken. Bausteine zu einer Kulturtheorie der Transdifferenz*. Frankfurt/M., New York: Campus 2005.; Kalscheuer, Britta/Allolio-Näcke, Lars (Eds.): *Kulturelle Differenzen begreifen. Das Konzept der Transdifferenz aus interdisziplinärer Sicht*. Frankfurt/M., New York: Campus 2008.

- 12 Bloch, Ernst: *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkam 2001.

Lösch,¹¹ provides useful heuristic tools which put in epistemic focus the transgressive and non-linear phenomena which transcend a demarcation line of binary opposites, oscillating in the constant processes of their own (re)figurations. Moreover, operating simultaneously on theoretical, empirical and critical levels, transference theory examines complex procedures of re/de/constructions of individual and collective identities in the socio-historical contexts of mixed and multiple belongings, of which the Balkan heterotopia is an exemplary case.

Regarding concrete methodological procedures, an integrative approach might appear the most convenient. This implies that virtual analytical models of future of Balkan Studies should combine micro- and macro-perspectivization, encourage convergent research into material and symbolic factors of social and cultural dynamics, and insist on thorough historical contextualization. Special attention should also be paid to the phenomenon of the simultaneity of non-simultaneous,¹² one of the most typical features of the Balkan historical experience.

Finally, according to the epistemic imperatives of the recent »praxeological turn«, a transnational and translational epistemology for a Balkan heterotopia must take into account the recursive relationship between political, social, and economic structures and creative human practices which are mutually constitutive, esp. when an actual and effective activity of cultural mediators is in question. Last but not least, a key meta-theoretical postulate of Balkan Studies should be self-reflexivity, i.e. a constant critical examination of the ethics and politics of the discipline in order to reflect the very presuppositions upon which Balkanist knowledge, as a perspectival, selective and situational cognitive and interpretative enterprise, has been generated.

This has been a short sketch of my »rescue plan« for Balkan Studies to evade its threatened marginalization within academe and, owing to transnational and translational epistemology, to become a relevant and competitive research field in the post-transitional, globalized world. Under such circumstances, the title question of the workshop might be answered in inverse: Balkan Studies will not go to Rome to be crucified, but jubilantly head towards New Jerusalem.

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