

Second Balkan studies meeting

In search of the Balkans: Between Europe and the Mediterranean?

Marseille, June 2-4, 2016

Call for proposals

The “In search of the Balkans: between Europe and the Mediterranean?” conference (June 2-4, 2016) will follow the “Balkan studies: state of knowledge and lines of research” meeting organized by the French Association of Balkan studies (AFEBALK) in Paris in November 2002. The objective of this new meeting is to provide an overview of the current state of research concerning this region through the perspective of the multiple ways of practicing social sciences here. Nearly fifteen years after the previous meeting, a new milestone in the contemporary Balkan studies in France has to be set. Numerous issues valid then (minorities, conflicts, borders, interfaith co-existence etc.), which often contributed to characterizing the Balkans as a “separate” space in Europe, have now given way to new perspectives, new challenges and new research practices. This new “return of the Balkans” to the forefront of the European scene has been demonstrated by distinct events such as the entry of certain countries in the European Union (Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, Croatia in 2013) and the prospective membership of others (Serbia, Montenegro, Republic of Macedonia, etc.) as well as a series of far-reaching events such as the eruption of the financial crisis in Greece and its global effects and the massive and dramatic migratory processes currently facing the entire southeast European region. In different manners, these events have led us to view the Balkan area as connected to both continental (new EU memberships) and globalization (spread of the economic crisis, migrations) trends. The participation of Balkan societies in wider processes has been accompanied by numerous transformations that have affected the everyday lives of its inhabitants over the last decades.

As such, beyond the question “are the Balkans still valid ?” (a rhetorical question at the time of the Greek crisis, the migration issues, the EU membership process and geopolitical recomposition processes in eastern and southern Europe), we can ask in what manner southeastern Europe still constitutes an effective observatory to understand the wider social dynamics affecting both the European continent and the Mediterranean region. This enlarged perspective spanning Europe and the Mediterranean will also enable us to reconsider the position of the Balkans as no longer as an “separate” region whose study is shaped by determining historical and social particularities, but instead as a region caught up in more global processes that its position contributes to reveal and whose specificities reveal, sometime with even more acuity, certain particular aspects. This perspective also aims to re-examine the often ambiguous status of work on Balkans in the context of the Mediterranean and European studies. In effect, research during the Cold War period had been oriented for an extended period in favor of themes shared with the Soviet universe, while the political troubles of the 1990s and the opening of the Balkan borders led to both vain and persistent interrogations concerning the “identity” or the “definition” of the Balkans, often viewed in this perspective as irremediably particular. In general, attempts to consciously imagine the inclusion of this region in wider spaces have remained up until now rare and ideologically marked by the prism of nationalism or cultural particularism.

This type of questioning nevertheless involves major epistemological and methodological challenges: the articulation of scale analysis (local, national, regional, global) according to and within the disciplines, the variety of field practices (work on/in several countries, work on the networks and/or the territories), the necessary identification of new places/social worlds, the updating of the already customary subjects of “Balkan studies” (from Ottoman history to Europeanization questions) as well as the interdisciplinary dimension and avenues of scientific production opening onto other fields (applied research, expertise, science, development, art) leading to the elaboration of new writing techniques and output modes. Highlighting these different aspects of research is essential in order to provide an accurate overall picture of current social practices in the Balkans (of) today, within as well as on the fringes of academic research. Through these main questions, the goal of the conference will be to put in perspective the ways of approaching research in/on this region and to show how they could result in a wider reflection concerning the practice of social sciences as regards Europe and the Mediterranean region.

In their proposals, the participants are invited to position themselves on the following themes in order to facilitate the organization of the conference workshops.

1. Transformation and recomposition: What do the processes of “integration”, “change” or even “convergence” mean for the inhabitants, societies and political and economical actors of the Balkans in light of the transformations that took place after the falls of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires and the Soviet-inspired regimes with the 1990 and 2000 conflicts and the new role of the European Union? How are these categories, presented as formed in the “West” or elsewhere in the world, understood and interpreted at a time when reference frames are in constant transformation and the relativity of the models appears to be imposing itself in all the Mediterranean countries? In what way do these changes, even while resulting from particular and original processes, constitute configurations in which different preexisting social, economical and political forces aggregate and adapt? Even if the paradigm of rupture regularly permeates the analysis of social mutations, this should not lead us to ignore the forms of recomposition and continuity that accompany them. It is not the least of paradoxes to see convergence impose itself as the only possible outlook at the same time the Balkans (along with numerous other Euro-Mediterranean spaces) are seeing intensified exploitation of cultural heritages often stressing historical and cultural particularities. These trends can involve both micro- and macro- transformation and recomposition, ranging from major geopolitical questions (borders, diplomatic influence etc.) to concrete day-to-day experiences. They raise questions concerning the terms used to qualify changes (modernization, Europeanization, urbanization) and their meanings.

2. Circulations et hierarchization: The focus here will be on movements (of people, ideas, goods etc.) taking place in the societies of southeastern Europe (migrations, mobility, tourism, networks, diasporas) in light of their role as an essential dimension of social processes, both global and local. These circulations invite us to look beyond “methodological nationalism (or regionalism)” in order to get a better sense of the globalized issues crossing the region. They also invite to understand the new forms of hierarchization underway in the societies in question in light of movements that are simultaneously indicators and vectors of divisions, inequality and obstructions of all kinds (political, economic, social, cultural etc.). This hierarchization invites us to understand all the forms of “power” in their different understandings/meanings, but also alternative powers and the processes of fragmentation, pluralization, redistribution and opposition. This consideration also leads to the question of traditional national allegiances and of redeployment of government structures regularly put into question by neoliberal theories, supra-national structures and local demands. It seems possible to question here the particular conditions of the reconfiguration of logics of power in Balkan countries in light of global processes that are seeing the confrontation between state-centered (nation states) and multi-centered (supra national entities, migrants, diasporas, trading networks etc.) structures. In this movement, certain linguistic or religious groups adopt affirmative or particularist stances that go beyond and complicate the dominant narratives, leading to reconsideration of majority/minority relationships and focusing debates around the role of allegiances between the recognition of cultural diversity and fears of communitarianism. This dialectic (between particularism and integration) can also be examined through the angle of regional geopolitics and of the transformation of political relations on the Mediterranean scale. Turkish and Russian investments in the region as well as the American military presence are reminders of the position of the Balkan peninsula on the global geopolitical chessboard and the validity of its study in terms of security and stability.

3. Narrations and innovations: In this perspective, the construction of meanings by the social actors inside the societies in question must also be considered: management of histories, legacies, national legends, ideologies, memories and cultural heritages as well as life and day-to-day experiences, reinvention of connections, social and cultural pluralism. Reflections concerning old or new categories such as communities, minorities and national groups as well as social or alternative movements and gender issues can once again be included here. The idea of innovation opens the way to new imaginations, inventions and re-inventions, notably in the context of chronic “crisis” in principle affecting the societies in question and calling for changes in expectation horizons, creating reactions, aspirations, initiatives in very diverse areas ranging from culture to environment and political or economical alternatives. The special attention given to narrative regimes and discourses as well as practices and experiences also aims to explore aspects as varied as the ordinary,

sensitive, affective, personal and intimate dimensions of the social sphere that enable to extract the actors in question from sweeping or reifying cultural or social categories. Through these different observation points, questions will also be raised regarding the ways in which inhabitants of the region practice and conceive the Balkans, Europe and the Mediterranean.

4. Practices and forms of knowledge: This topic runs through all the previous reflections and will be a major orientation of this meeting. In effect, research is not conducted today as it was a decade ago, in the Balkans as in other places: new methods, new conceptions and new interlocutors and sources have appeared, with for example the creation of collaborative forms of research and the opening towards other professional worlds (artists, planners, architects). Additionally, research and teaching institutions as well as the social demand (particularly political) have evolved since the 1990s. In what way has the European integration of a part of the region changed the situation? What have been the effects of Mediterranean “news” (revolutions, wars, terrorism, migration etc.) on this social demand and on research methods? Insights into these areas of inquiry can be found in the different paths taken by researchers or their interlocutors. These changes have also had an effect on the theoretical tools, methodology or explicative paradigms being used. For example, where are stand now concerning the “ethnic powers” and “Balkanism” that French research has focused on so much since the 1990s? To what extent have certain of these concepts moved beyond Balkan studies per se? Can transversal paradigms be identified between the Balkans, Europe and Mediterranean? This angle of approach necessarily leads to questioning, from a methodological point of view, of the relationship between Balkan studies and European and Mediterranean studies, without preconceived notions regarding their unity and coherence.

Looking beyond the mobilization of local teams of the University of Aix-Marseille (Maison méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme, LabexMed, MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée), Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan (CREC), Lyon (CREA and EVS) and CETOBAC (EHESS, CNRS and Collège de France), these meetings aim to constitute a new milestone enabling the re-valorization of the activity of the French Association of Balkan studies as a interdisciplinary exchange framework for researchers working in France (regularly as well as occasionally) on the southeaster European countries. This is the reason why this conference will also leave room for personal and institutional experiences, roundtables for the discussion of the current state of Balkan studies along and broader discussions with the public regarding these questions during sessions largely open to the public.

The proposals (maximum 2,500 characters spaces included, in English or in French, with five key words and the indication as to which theme the contribution could be integrated into) must be submitted on the scienceconf.org platform before January 30, 2016, along with a biographical note five lines long. You will receive a response on March 1. This meeting will lead to several publications.

The organization of the conference will not be able to pay for transportation or lodgings for participants. Certain requests can be submitted to the organizers and will be granted depending on the available budget. No inscription fees will be charged.

Scientific committee

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