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1989 THROUGH THE YUGOSLAV
KALEIDOSCOPE

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The 3rd International Conference on Conceptual History, “Conceptualising Modernity in the Central and Southeastern European Cultures: Notions, Discourses and Languages”, Timișoara, Romania, 8-11th October 2014.

The adaptation and linguistic transformation of modernity became the topic of several historical approaches during the past decades. Reinhart Koselleck and Werner Conze were the first scholars to focus their attention on this topic through conceptual history and the history of concepts. By the means of the history of the discourse, Michel Foucault highlighted the importance of the language as a social circumstance, as cognition of the world socially built, contested and placed in a certain time. Conceptual history, historical semantics and the history of the discourse have proved their force of interpretation in the case of Western Europe and are understood more and more as a diversification of instructive perception about Central and Southeastern Europe.

Therefore, the Centre for Advanced Studies in History, the “Reinhart Koselleck“ International Doctoral School of Conceptual History, both functioning within the West University of Timișoara, the Institute of History of RWTH Aachen (Modern History Chair) and the Timișoara Art Museum organised an international scientific conference and invited researchers to participate in an interdisciplinary dialogue among historians, linguists, philosophers and sociologists. The central theme of the conference was how modernity is reflected in the languages, notions, concepts and discourses in Central and Southeastern Europe and what kind of local, regional, national and transnational breaches have existed in this area. The organisers encouraged dichotomist approaches, such as local-national, national-European, centre-periphery, we-you, friend-enemy, East-West, etc.

After the introductory remarks by the organisers and the keynote speech by Hans-Erich Bödeker of the Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science in Göttingen, entitled *Travelling concepts*, in total 21 scholars presented their research. Among others, Melina Rokai held an exposé on the conceptualization of modernity of Serbian women in the 19th century British travelogues and concluded that British travellers conceptualised modernity of Serbian women as half-way between Oriental and European and preserved that picture throughout the century. The Oriental image was seen as backward and foreign, and anything that resembled European was viewed as modern.

Sorin Antohi spoke on the topic of conceptualisation of anti-modernism and outlined its conceptual history, moving from Central and Southeastern European terrains to the whole of Europe and beyond, addressing the diverse, transnational and intercultural semantic field of anti-modernism.

Andrei Cusco held a talk on the topic of Bessarabia in the Russian imperial discourse (1878-1914) in the context of Otherness, belonging and modernity in

a contested borderland. Cusco pointed out to the increasing importance of the imperial borderlands in defining the claims of rival continental empires to be genuinely “modern” in the early-20th century setting of proliferating mass politics.

László L. Lajtai held an exposé on key concepts of the national history in the Hungarian history textbooks during the „long 19th century”. Lajtai concluded that the examination of the temporal transformations of the concept of nationality seems to be elucidating as it helps to comprehend how this term, conceived at the end of the 18th century, lost its originally dynamic semantic potential by narrowing itself down to the meaning of “a fragmentary populace of distinct race” soon after the Compromise of 1867.

Ljubodrag P. Ristić held an exposé on the phenomenon of learning of foreign languages as a process of modernization in 19th century Serbia. Ristić pointed out that the influence of Western European and Russian environments spread throughout the Principality/Kingdom of Serbia thanks to learning of foreign languages and improving language skills, and that was very important for the further prosperity and modernisation of Serbia. These influences were shadowed by strong political and economic impacts, but at the same time they supported expansion of these very influences by breaking barriers made by unfamiliarity with foreign languages, civilisations and cultures.

Victor Rizescu presented a paper on the “liberal socialism” in Romania as an interpretation of “social justice”. Rizescu talked about the writings and ideas of the Romanian sociologist Dumitru Draghicescu, more precisely about his social philosophy shaped at the interplay between the European social-democratic tradition and his core Durkheimian ideas. Rizescu also talked about the Romanian context of the notion of “social justice” and of related notions, heavily employed by Draghicescu.

Sorin Alexandrescu held a talk on the interwar Romanian political pluralism and pointed out that the interwar Romania had a complex network of relations between political and cultural groups instead of a simple opposition between traditionalists and modernists. Accordingly, Alexandrescu outlined seven “subcultures”, based on fundamentally different ideological and artistic options.

Roxana Breazu spoke on the topic of conceptualisation of the social through the economic in a case study offered by the analysis of the work of the economist and philosopher Stefan Zeletin. Breazu’s research constitutes a part of the project on Romanian economic thought, which will critically reappraise the role of comparison in transnational history by leaving methodological nationalism behind and taking a point of departure with economic concepts as part of wider networks of actors while still understand the role of the nation as a global space.

Andelko Vlašić presented a paper on the modernity of interwar Turkey through the eyes of Yugoslav Travellers from 1923 to 1941. The analysis of books

and newspapers comprising testimonies of Yugoslav travellers showed that the perception of Turkey among Yugoslav travellers was based on the contrast between the negativity of the “old”, “traditional” and “backward” Ottoman Empire and the positivity of the “new”, “modern” and “Western-oriented” Turkey. Vlašić showed how the discourse of Turks as the European Other had changed in the interwar years.

Victor Neumann held an exposé on the conceptualisation of modernity in multi- and intercultural spaces, based on the case of Central and Eastern Europe. Neumann pointed out that, once the ethno-national idea became widely spread, the conceptualisation of modernity and the models of political and societal thought had to stand up to different meanings and types of discourses, as well as to a suite of ideological contradictions.

Armin Heinen talked about the “social entirety” in the German historical science of the 19th and 20th century. Heinen emphasised that it is not the experience of society and its conflicts that coined the cultural discourse in Germany, but the expectation of creating conflict-free new forms of community. In the German context, the view on history did not serve for understanding the present, but for creating the future. When in the 1960s the term “society” became a term for the Germans and their historians, “national society” was already dispersing. Heinen concluded that society is a term only appropriate for modern times.

Cristian Roiban spoke about the concept of the “socialist nation” in the Romanian national-communist political thought from 1970 to 1989. Roiban stated that the meanings of the concept “nation” were altered and forced into the semantic field of the concept of socialism, by merging the morphology of the two ideologies including only those concepts which were suitable and excluding the opposite ones. Furthermore, the alterations from inside or outside the national state borders (ethnic, religious, cultural, etc.) were regarded as suspicious and threatening. Artificial concepts were created to fit the regime’s discursive needs, by attaching the term “socialist” to existing notions.

The conference was concluded with a roundtable whose topic was modernity, global learning and the neo-sophic turn. Participants of the roundtable included Victor Neumann, Armin Heinen, Mihai Spariosu, Sorin Antohi and Hans-Erich Bödeker. Spariosu talked about the distinction between modernity and modernism and stated that a number of scholars equate modernity and the industrial revolution. Spariosu pointed out that, unlike modernism, modernity is not a period concept, but a transhistorical concept; a state of mind, and not a time period, going back to the beginning of history. Moreover, Spariosu pleaded for a neo-sophic turn, or (re)turning to wisdom, calling the 21st century the age of global and lifelong learning. Spariosu and other participants of the roundtable presented the idea of establishment of Global learning centres (GLC), as centres for global learning.

The conference offered valuable presentations covering a wide range of topics, but still in connection with its central theme of the conceptualisation of modernity. The organisers informed the gathered researchers that their contributions would be published in a collective volume in Germany. This meeting of scholars should be an excellent incentive for similar conferences in the near future.

Anđelko VLAŠIĆ