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## **Doctus Perfectus, Homo Applicandus and Professor Fortuna**

Conceptual Analysis

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# Doctus Perfectus, Homo Applicandus and Professor Fortuna

Karl Kaser\*

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## Introduction

When the future or, more specifically, a redirection of South-East European studies is discussed in a series of essays in this journal, one has to have in mind that this is not the first discussion of this kind – and for sure not the concluding one. In an increasingly globalizing world, area studies are under permanent critical observation. What can particular findings related to an area contribute to the understanding of the whole, the global, and how is the global represented in the particularities of an area?<sup>1</sup> However, this kind of critical self-reflection that can sometimes result in self-deprecation was not always the case in the long history of the study of South-East Europe.

One crucial observation in this regard is that debates of this kind hardly existed before 1989. The world seemed to be stable since it was divided into the two ideological and military blocks of ‘the East’ and ‘the West,’ as well as a third area consisting of countries that were members of the non-aligned movement for decades. Area studies, conceptualized as the study of ‘the other,’ were considered an indispensable ingredient of a world order that seemed to be chiselled in stone forever. The consequences of the collapse of this world order were manifold. The questioning of traditional area studies focused on its rather insignificant outcomes – compared to the macro-structural shake-up of political, economic and cultural relations, of the relationship between the global north and south and the relationship of the USA to the rest. However, insignificance can become significant when identities of area-study scholars are at stake and when voices pleading for a complete rethinking of area studies become louder.

In this short essay, I aim to show that (1) the study of South-East Europe has been reinvented several times in the previous quarter of a century without resulting in profound changes and that (2) some considerations might explain that a developmental strategy can hardly be implemented even in a rather comprehensive discipline or a bunch of disciplines that operate under the name

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Kaser. 2014. The Balkans and the Near East. In: Christian Promitzer, Siegfried Gruber and Harald Heppner (eds.). *Southeast European Studies in a Globalizing World*. Lit: Vienna-Berlin, 77-82.

of South-East European studies. It should be underlined that (1) I do not include South-East European studies in the region itself, but exclusively studies of the region taking place outside of it and that (2) my perspective is primarily a historical one.

### **Reinventions without profound change**

In the quarter of a century that followed the fatal year of 1989, South-East European studies and several sub-disciplines have been reinvented multiple times without being profoundly changed. This situation reminds us of one of Mexico's leading political parties, called the 'Institutional Revolutionary Party,' that had at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century promised to institutionalize revolution. Similarly, South-East European studies can be characterized as 'Institutional Revolutionary Studies' – on the one hand, permanently reinvented and redirected, at least in programmatic essays of some of their representatives. On the other hand, our field (or fields) has so far in practice not developed in revolutionary ways. What has changed can be described as tradition clothed in new fashion, as scholarly makeup or as old wine in new skins.

I see two quantitatively dominating and related research fields in the previous two or so decades that I would like to call the 'premier league of South-East European studies': Yugoslav war/post-war studies and identity studies. The reason for their dominance is probably that the pre-1989 academic personnel could relatively easily serve these two research fields, as the gap between Cold War studies and Yugoslav war/post-war studies could be easily overcome. Identity studies constituted an ideal field for those who thought that people in an ethnically mixed problem-region must have had problems with their identity. Within this field, nationalism has been a grateful object of study. Of course, South-East European studies constitute a wide field and not everybody has been playing or has intended to play in their premier league. Other approaches or thematic fields, such as social history, historical anthropology or gender studies, had problems of being fully acknowledged if they could not be related to topics of the premier league. This is not a critique of anything or anybody, but an attempt to explain why profound changes in this research field have not taken place.

The desire to play in a certain league has something to do with the intention to make an academic career. I think that in making a career, one tends to position oneself in mainstream research, rather than on its margins. This is another factor that stabilizes rather than destabilizes a research discipline. Young researchers and their academic supervisors come into play here. Do they want to be on the alleged safe side (premier league) or do they seek their future on the fringes of mainstream studies? Are they ready to risk something in order to establish alternative ground-breaking research goals and fields? What does this have to do with the pre-academic socialization of a researcher and his or her general aims in life? How is one to make a career in a time that is poisoned by the spirit of neo-liberalism and excessive competition? This destructive competition takes place primarily within the cohorts of young researchers and has replaced the probably more productive, more innovative and sometimes fierce competition of a younger generation with an established one.

I think it is too short-sighted, however absolutely necessary, to formulate the glorious future of a discipline or an area study only in theoretical terms without taking into consideration the above mentioned and additional dimensions that in the name of innovation undermine innovation. I have done the former in various essays<sup>2</sup> and others have done the same. If we put them together, we could easily state, and not without irony, that South-East European studies will land in a glorious heaven – although not without contradictions. They will be, of course, inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinary, they will be trans-local, trans-national and trans-focal and they will be characterized by gender, as well as by post-colonial positions, by increasing importance of visual studies and by a new intellectual history of our region. I don't think anybody would disagree in regard to this. Why there is a region that is considered as South-East Europe or the Balkans and what constitutes its geographical, ideological, historical and contemporary framework remains disputed. However, there is something like a European region that can be termed in that way. As a historian, I famously prefer a Eurasian-Minor perspective, but this is not the real problem. The real problem is reality.

To think and to write about the bright future of our South-East European studies is one thing; to put such a great program into practice is another one. The premiere league is a fact and its research agenda differs significantly from the wishful one. Is the reason for this the fact that we are too few to know the complete ropes? Maybe.

### **Homo applicandus, doctus perfectus and professor fortuna**

I think the more urgent question is which circumstances foster innovation and which ones diminish it. In this regard, the ideal figures of the *doctus perfectus*, the *homo applicandus* and the *professor fortuna* play a crucial role: the perfect scholar, the third-party funding application automat (very free translation) and the professor of coincidence. These figures can be attached to specific factors that have an impact on the development of scientific disciplines. One crucial factor of stability and change in disciplines is marked by the professional lifespan of appointed university professors, which is approximately twenty years. This is a considerable amount of time if we consider the fact that this species usually tends to be innovative at the beginning of its career and then starts to 'institutionalize' innovation, which, as a matter of fact, consists of the prolonged administration of previous innovativeness. The latter tendency does not necessarily have to be considered negative since this kind of persistence may function as effective protection against short-lived conjunctures – something that also happens in academia.

The concrete orientation of university disciplines does not only depend on its internal innovativeness; there are additional, more or less visible external constraints that have an impact on disciplines, but also on the type and personality of appointed professors. One of these constraints consists of the observation that somehow exaggerated, the university has become a quasi-

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Kaser. 2014. Disciplinary Boundaries in Question: Balkan Studies in a Globalizing World, *Godišnjak. Centar za balkanološka ispitivanja* 42(1), 215-225.

enterprise with the aim to produce surpluses – whatever this means. In this neo-liberal concept, figures and statistics have become relevant indicators of success and fiasco. As almost everywhere, the faculty of sciences is on the winning side, while the humanities are on the losing side. Since universities have not become real enterprises, of course, and their surpluses in knowledge production can never be actually evaluated, the acquisition of third-party-funded research has become crucial. This is relatively easy for faculties of sciences and medicine, but is rather difficult for the faculties of the humanities, whose tradition has found satisfaction in individual intellectual adventures and holds the view that their right to exist in a society, which is proud of its classical tradition in education, had been self-evident.

This time is definitely over. In a world that is shaped by neo-liberalism, processes of globalization, global competition and economic crises, the humanities have lost their former virginal innocence and the traditionally styled professor-type (the *doctus perfectus*) has become a phased out model. Exposed to the constraints of being somehow profitable, a new type of academic entrepreneur has been emerging: the *homo applicandus*. This new type of academic is shaped by his or her capacity to develop competitive research projects, to write smart applications, to meet application deadlines of national and international third-party-funded research programs and to manage, as well as to execute, research projects.

### **Conclusion**

Until now, academic capitalism and neoliberalism have resulted in two opposite camps. The first is the *docti perfecti*, whose members assemble themselves behind the banner of ‘slow science,’ protesting against the ‘Stalinism of excellence,’ and who refuse to abandon the traditional university culture. The second camp consists of those who represent the new figure that has emerged in academia, the academic entrepreneur; in the humanities, this is concretely the successful *homo applicandus*. The institutionalisation of university-business linkages creates a new partnership, new forms of knowledge, new types of actors, but also many new constraints and exclusions. We at the humanities will find it hard to establish business linkages, except with non-profit organizations, which are not very useful. We have to specialize in writing successful applications to research agencies.

This new type of professor, the *homo applicandus*, is in relatively sharp opposition to the traditionally styled *doctus perfectus*, who is probably lacking management qualities, but is equipped with other significant qualities that foster the discipline’s development. If the *homo-applicandus*-type professors become gatekeepers in their field, they will keep the gate open to those who are of similar style and personality and keep the gate closed for the *doctus-perfectus*-type. The opposite may also be true – they will close the gate for a potential competitor and open it for a potential loser.

The decisive question is not only whether or not one politically and/or morally prefers this aspect of commercialization of research, but also, more importantly, whether this mechanism is productive or unproductive with regard to innovations in the respective research field. Experience shows that

the application mechanism tends to situate an application in the centre of a discipline's content in order to minimize risks. Innovation, however, does not usually come from the centre or the premier league, but rather from its fringes. If we accept the consideration that appointed professors, who usually recruit their staff to fit their profile, are crucial for the further development of their respective disciplines, then the selection procedures of appointments committees, deans and rectors play crucial roles for the future of a discipline. At the University of Graz, there is a clear tendency to decrease the role of appointments committees and to increase the role of the rector's administration in the selection procedure. This means that an administration, which does not and cannot have a clear idea of the internal peculiarities and necessities of specific disciplines, will take over the leading roles in the advertisement and the description of the positions. The rector already has the final decision in appointment matters. It does not seem that the best-qualified person, the *homo-applicandus* or the *doctus-perfectus*-type, has always been appointed, but rather the one who sells his or her soul the cheapest to the university. In other words, *professor fortuna* becomes an increasingly important reality. Furthermore, if we consider that additional factors, such as gender and age issues, can become decisive in appointment procedures, a certain or wishful outcome is hardly foreseeable.

To conclude, there cannot be any doubt about the necessity of critically reflecting on the status of South-East European studies in light of achievements in other area studies, as well as in the temporarily oriented disciplines. Also, it is beyond question that we need to think carefully about the future of our studies. What I wanted to show in this short essay was that the likelihood that things turn out differently from ideal concepts is high.