

XIVth English-language Summer University for students in the humanities

Communities, civil society, citizenship, 16 July - 3 August 2000, Bilgi University (Istanbul)

Transeuropéennes (Paris) ; Jointly organised with The Bilgi University. With the participation of: The Helsinki Citizens' Assembly of Istanbul. With the support of: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Council of Europe, Open Society Institutes.

Project overview

An itinerant English-Language University

Created in 1997, Transeuropéennes' Englishlanguage summer university was conceived as an itinerant project in the Balkans region. Indeed, the only way to guarantee Transeuropéennes' key objective - that is, to draw attention to the value of the civil society in each of the countries concerned - the regular movement of Transeuropéennes' projects seemed the obvious choice.

This itinerancy complements that of the Regional co-operation workshops; its goal is, in particular, to highlight universities which are open onto the contemporary world, onto life and the city, and to develop in-depth knowledge of the host city and society, while reinforcing Transeuropéennes' local network.

The summer universities of 1997 and 1998 were held in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Those of 1999 and 2000 were held with success in Istanbul, in Turkey, and were jointly organised with the Bilgi University (Prof. Aydin Ugur), in co-operation with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly.

Based upon an ethic, a methodology and commonly held and unreservedly upheld objectives, the partnership with the Bilgi University in Istanbul greatly enriched the programme in Istanbul over the past two years, both in human terms and in terms of content. Exceptional work conditions were made available on location both to those taking part in the summer university and to the Transeuropéennes team: ease of getting around, classrooms equipped with computer equipment, screening room for the films, video equipment, musical instruments and sound equipment for a concert in 2000! The logistical organisation, looked after by the Bilgi University, was praised by all. On location, in Istanbul, the meetings organised with the different associative, cultural, communications and media milieus, thanks to our partner, in co-operation with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, made it possible to build bridges between the courses and the "extramural" activities of the summer university.

Istanbul

There is no doubt that the city of Istanbul was one of the principal characters in the summer universities of 1999 and 2000. On several occasions, accompanied by enthusiastic academics (Murat Belge, in 1999, and Jak Deleon, in 2000), but also guided by the members of the Transeuropéennes network in Istanbul or by the local programme co-ordinators, the students explored the city's different facets, its historical strata, its geography squeezed between the seas.

This confrontation with the city was not without consequences: it enabled the majority of the participants to contextualise their own history. It gave them the possibility of putting their own country, city, community and family into perspective in geographical, historical and symbolic terms. The students lost themselves at leisure in the city, its mazes, accelerated rhythm, landscapes between the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn; the city worked on them as much as they worked on it.

Certain participants emphasised that the city had something dizzying about it. A dizziness not unrelated to historical depth. And this historical depth, with its complexity, mixes of cultures, populations and so on is, for the young students of Southeast Europe the greatest barrier imaginable against simplifications, manipulations, and partitioning of all kinds.

The Theme for 2000: “Communities, civil society, citizenship”

Close to the working title in 1999 (Communitybased strategies and civil society), the title for 2000 sought to formulate more straightforwardly the problematic of the individual, as a political subject, caught between the community in which he or she is rooted and the transversal dynamics of the civil society.

The civil society is the social sphere where individuals / citizens have similar interests, beliefs and world views form links amongst themselves, and associate in order to better have their voice heard, and, in that way, influence decision-making mechanisms. As opposed to the public sphere, where legal “equality” predominates, it is also the sphere where citizens perceive themselves and are perceived as subjects bearing the stamp of their “difference” - whether in terms of sex, culture, etc. It is, finally, the sphere where plurality is able to unfold in full force.

Nevertheless, this plurality can only be a bearer of pluralism if in the said society there exists a common agreement between the various actors as to the democratic rules, and if a state ensures that these rules are followed. In order for pluralism to be established and to function, another condition is required: the state apparatus has to act as arbiter and manage to keep itself at equal distance from each social component. If this is not the case, the actors enjoying more (human and / or material) resources will tend to break the precarious balance and the rationality of might makes right will come to

prevail.

It is clear, on the other hand, that between the civil society and democracy there exists an elective affinity. For in totalitarian systems - and, to a lesser extent, in authoritarian systems - the power holds the only truth, and there is no room for the expression of competing truths, no room for the expression of difference. Hence, moreover, the absence of public opinion as an operational institution in totalitarian systems.

The development of the civil society thus goes hand in hand with democratic development. In the advanced democracies, what is important is not only majority rule, but the preservation of rights. The subject of these rights, it must be emphasised, is the individual. The entire history of democratic struggles can be read as a struggle to break the domination exerted by the society and the community on the individual.

The Balkans, by the yardstick of these precepts, appears a problematic region. Thus the objective of the Istanbul summer university, both in 1999 and 2000, was to evaluate the situation in the region and to shed light on democracy not only as a regime, but as a way of life. The university assigned itself the task of providing a comparative point of view on relations between the state, the citizen and the various (religious, linguistic, etc.) communities. It was careful not to lose sight of the historical dimension, so present in the region.

One of the first tasks that the preparation team set itself for the year 2000 was to clarify the following concepts and theoretical tools:

- civil society, public sphere;
- individual, citizen;
- Nation state, minority, community, collective belonging;
- tradition, patriarchal society, individual rights;
- (re)construction of social ties.

Relying on the one hand on the interdisciplinary character of the teaching (sociology, anthropology, political science, philosophy, art, history) and on the other hand on the participants' personal experience, the group tackled the following questions:

1. Does the discourse founded on collective identity enable individuality to express itself freely?
2. Does the emergence of communities as key actors in the society constitute a weighty obstacle to the development of the citizen / individual? And does it not break the social ties between citizens?
3. Do all communities tend to be closed on themselves? And if so, do they not tend to inhibit democratic coexistence and dialogue?

Parallel to the theoretical and interdisciplinary courses, the point of the work groups, the screenings of documentaries, the outside meetings with the local NGOs, the debates organised on the themes of crisis in the region was to broaden the angles of reflection.

General conclusions

Participants

Thirty-two students took part in the summer university 2000 at Bilgi - a majority of whom were women. One Greek student from Nicosia, Cyprus, was unfortunately unable to obtain her Turkish entrance visa, despite the measures undertaken to remedy the situation. A considerable gap was noticeable between the students from Serbia, worn down - or even outright depressed - by Slobodan Milosevic's clinging to power and the growing restriction of public freedoms, and the students from the other countries. Also noticeable was the great dynamism of the students from Prishtina, borne up by the feeling that the worst was behind them, and that it was up to them to organise new, more positive phases. One of the most interesting aspects of aspects of the university no doubt lay in the way in which the students from Belgrade and those from Prishtina created indefectible ties during the session, and in so doing, took the risk of exposing themselves, along with their respective communities, to violent reprobation. Though the participants' level of knowledge was not uniform, due to significant gaps in the academic standards in the region, and inequalities in terms of access to knowledge, the group as a whole, exceptionally dynamic, was characterised by a single intellectual quality: its critical spirit and its human qualities. The highly active participation of the students in the courses, the number and interest of questions raised, the general quality of the discussion all confirmed this one more than one occasion.

Remarkably tight knit at the end of the session, thanks to the numerous projects which the participants were able to put together with the support and advice of the academics and assistants from Bilgi University, the group remains one of the most constructive in the history of the summer universities. Contrary to other summer universities, where the lack of self-organisation could be felt, the students in this session were, on the contrary, capable to carry out their projects collectively and in well co-ordinated fashion, in a relatively short period of time. This enabled high quality level of production, with the organisation of a photography exhibition, a video film, a rock concert, a T-shirt in Transeuropéennes - Bilgi 2000 colours.

By the same token, immediately after the summer university, an email dialogue group was set up, whose activity during the three months following the summer university was very intense. The discussion platform functions as a space for putting together common projects and as a forum for debates, on current-event issues in the region.

Confronting stereotypes between sessions

During the summer university 2000, a new initiative emerged from the network of former students, who had taken part in the Bilgi summer university in 1999. Following their proposal, a workshop on national stereotypes was led by two women who had taken part in 1999, and were invited back to Istanbul for the occasion. A young historian, who had also taken part in Bilgi in 1999, and who happened to be in town for a Turkish-language course over the summer, reinforced their number. The trio incited the participants to deal with the collective stereotypes which dominate in their countries with regard to their national neighbours. Not always well perceived by the participants, who were aware of their open-mindedness and their critical spirit, the initiative ultimately produced some interesting results, everyone becoming aware of this amorphous grouping of received ideas surrounding them and which had to be struggled against if a critical distance was to be established. This session, wavering between

comedy and tragedy, also had the effect of loosening up the tongues, breaking down a number of taboos, and establishing an atmosphere of confidence between the participants.

Rethinking the individual in his or her relationship to the collective

As a whole, the theoretical approaches which were put forward in the framework of the courses dealt with the role and place of the individual in civil society, caught between often contradictory dynamics of affiliation to one community (whether linguistic or religious, etc.) and participation as a political subject in the life of the city. This question was tackled in various ways, and from extremely different angles. Firstly, an inventory of the issues of collective belonging was drawn up: multiple belonging, unique belonging, questions of community “loyalty”, questions of the relations between community-based tradition and the rule of law...

It was in this spirit that the programme paused, for instance, on the figure of the artist as someone who crosses the borders of predetermined identities, or on the role of religion as a community-based institution.

On the basis of an in-depth analysis of the situation in the Balkans, one year after the end of the NATO military intervention, a thoroughgoing reflection was undertaken with regard to the notions of nationalism, the nation state, ethnocracy, and it was moreover a strenuous critical analysis of nationalism in the region of the Balkans, and its destructive dynamics, which constituted the backbone of the short video film made by the students in the form of interviews during the session.

While community-based introspection reinforces internal cohesion and brings the members of a group closer together, it necessarily leads to a rupture with social ties with “others”, as well as to real or potential situations of conflict. How are situations of war and conflict to be avoided by reinforcing individuals, and above all those who, like many of the women activists in the region, have the capacity to integrate the dimension of otherness? How are social ties to be re-established when they have been destroyed, either through wars or through a fragmentation of the society? It is in this line of questioning that it was suggested that the students give thought to the phenomenon - common to many of the countries of the area - of rural exodus toward an urban milieu. How do traditional communities experience their new implantation in the urban centres? What are the terms of the confrontation with modes of life and values of the urban world?

The last part of the programme focused on the question of human rights in their articulation of - or confrontation with - collective dynamics. Are human rights compatible with community-based traditions? Can a pluri-cultural society genuinely rely on individual rights in order to make itself into a democracy?

Fighting the essentialist temptation

Decentring in order to better understand the world, look at official historiography with a critical eye, compare the transitions in Central Europe and Southeast Europe, question the idea according to which there are “good” and “bad” nationalisms, get away from the essentialist logic of a homogeneous Balkanic identity, out of synch with the rest of

Europe, and unfairly misunderstood...

This is undoubtedly the only way forward, if one is truly to carry out the critical reflection necessary for building new visions, new perspectives. Yet this sort of transversal, in-depth analysis remains the most difficult to carry out, for bearing witness always tends to win out over critical reflection.

This permanent feature of the Bilgi summer was not a handicap in and of itself. Indeed, the capacity to bear witness on one's own reality and to listen to and see the reality of the other in order to subsequently bear witness to it, forms the very basis of any critical distance. It is on this basis that an individual can speak in the first person and assert him- or herself as a political subject, desirous to move freely between multiple affiliations, multiple loyalties. The majority of the students in the year 2000 session at Bilgi perceived this founding experience with intensity and sought, successfully, to express it in these terms - often with a great deal of humour.

Synopsis prepared by Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes, with contributions from Burçu Gültekin, Sébastien Babaud, Sandra Aïdara.

Intervenants

Zeynep Avçi, Writer, translator, Bilgi University, Istanbul ; *Fatmagül Berktaş*, Lecturer in political science at the University of Istanbul ; *Martin van Bruinessen*, Professor of political science at the University of Leiden, Leiden ; *Jak DeLeon*, Professor of History at the Bogazici University, Istanbul ; *Gvozden Flego*, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb, Zagreb ; *Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes*, Director of Transeuropéennes, Paris ; *Sema Erder*, Sociologist, Bogazici University, Istanbul ; *Levent Köker*, Professor of Political Science, Istanbul ; *Ferhat Kentel*, Professor of Political Sociology, Istanbul ; *Vjollca Krasniqi*, Sociologist, activist, Prishtina ; *Ahmet Kuyas*, Associate professor of History at the Galatasaray University, Istanbul ; *Nedret Kuran*, Burcoglu Professor of Comparative Literature at the Bogazici University, Istanbul ; *Zarana Papic*, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Belgrade and at the Centre for Women's Studies (Belgrade) ; *Aaron Rhodes*, President of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, Vienna ; *Jacques Rupnik*, Research director at the Centre for International Studies and Research, Professor at the Institute for Political Studies, Paris ; *Aydin Ugur*, Professor, Dean on the Department of Communications at the Bilgi University, Istanbul ; *Semih Vaner*, Professor of Political Science (Turkological studies) at the Institute of Political Studies, Paris.

With the Transeuropéennes network: *Mucahit Bilici*, Doctoral candidate in philosophy, research assistant at the Bilgi University, Istanbul ; *Yesim Burul*, Research assistant in the Communications department, Bilgi University, Istanbul ; *Aleksandar Bacoski*, Transeuropéennes -Makedonja, Skopje ; *Jelena Mitrovic*, Philosophy student, Rijeka ; *Arlinda Zylali*, Transeuropéennes - Makedonja, Tetovo ; *Dino Mujadzovic*, History student, Zagreb ; *Gökhan Soytaş*, Political science student, Istanbul/Paris.

Partner and teams

Bilgi University in Istanbul.

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Notes
