

XVth French-language Summer University for students in the humanities

“Can we get rid of the past?”, 3 - 23 September 2000, Marc Bloch University (Strasbourg)

Transeuropéennes (Paris) ; jointly organised with The Marc Bloch University. With the participation of la Maison de l'Image ; with the support of: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Council of Europe, City of Strasbourg, Alsace Regional Council, Lower-Rhine General Council, European Cultural Foundation, Open Society Institutes (South-East sub programme).

Presentation of the theme

The summer university jointly organised with the Marc Bloch University analysed the question from a philosophical, historical and anthropological point of view. The theoretical tools the students were provided with dealt initially with the dialectic between memory and forgetting, subsequently with the repression of the past and its consequences, and lastly, with the excessive evaluation of the past and its aestheticisation.

In parallel, a series of case studies, drawing on documentary films, as well as on visiting the city of Strasbourg and its museums, was offered as a means of shedding light on the theoretical reflection.

In the framework of the informal workshops, each participant was invited to question his or her own relationship to the past, as well as the relationship prevailing in the society where he or she lived.

The geopolitical situation of the city of Strasbourg, opening up unique possibilities for thinking the past, the present and the future, particularly in terms of transborder and transnational co-operation, was especially fruitful for fieldwork, which also entailed an interpretation of the traces of the past in the city.

A gallery / album of images from the past

Before getting to the summer universities, each participant had put together a narrative on one aspect of his or her own relationship to the past and collective memory, which he or she presented and then reworked in the framework of the work sessions. This narrative took, according to the individuals, the following forms: a series of photographs taken by the student him or herself; a written collection of testimony; audio or audiovisual documents made of the family, neighbours and so on.

Giving ample coverage through its articles to the theme of the relationship to the past, issue 18 of the international cultural journal *Transeuropéennes*, devoted to “Civility and Humanitarian Action” was also handed out to the students as a reference guide.

General conclusions

Transeuropéennes’ fifteenth summer university took place for the fifth consecutive year in partnership with the Marc Bloch University, from 3 - 23 September 2000 in Strasbourg. It brought together twenty-eight students from Southeast Europe around the following question: “Can we get rid of the past?”

The group level was uneven, certain participants having at once a very good knowledge of French and an extensive general culture. Often, however, ease in the French language did not correspond to the individual’s cultural level and degree of knowledge. The best French speakers were not always the most curious or most active students.

At the outset of the summer university, the participants all showed little interest in the cultures and experiences of the neighbouring countries. Little by little, this tendency turned round - which is not the least of the successes of the three-week programme. From being very reserved at the outset, the group slowly acquired a genuine critical capacity, a collective and open-minded spirit, a sense of otherness, thanks above all to the confrontation, angers and reconciliations experienced on the occasion of certain difficult discussions (particularly following the screening of the film *Suicide of a Nation*).

The issues of a crucial debate

As shown by the concluding sessions and the reports written up by the students at the end of the summer university, this objective was amply achieved, the participants having managed to carry out an in-depth analysis, showing both reluctance to tackle the most conflict-ridden aspects of the question, and to find ways to get beyond their antagonisms. Painful in the first half of the summer university, discussions were subsequently able to establish the right distance. They made it possible to establish a framework of common references on question which had initially led to very rigid positions: collective responsibility and individual responsibility, forgiveness and reconciliation, the International Tribunal in The Hague and the need for warcrimes trials, the relationship to the Communist past, notions of identity, “ethos”, nation, relations between “Europe” and the “Balkans” (with the political-fantastical knot which makes any impartial appreciation of the issues very difficult).

The key question dealt with right from the beginning of the summer university was that of memory and forgetting, highlighting the need of memory and current social, political, geographical realities, which are not always compatible. The political appropriation / instrumentalisation of memory was the topic of several sessions, where nationalist myths and sacred interpretations of the past - which go so far as to invent an ad hoc past for language - were emphasised first of all. Referring to a domain which they had experienced personally - that of the ethnic nationalisms which have prevailed for the

past ten years in the Balkans - these aspects of the programme were very useful to the students, as their texts showed.

The analysis subsequently carried out on the amnesia of the Communist past showed the differences in perceptions between the students from Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, and those from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, for whom the Communist past remains almost taboo.

The case of the conflict-ridden past between France and Germany, seen through the prism of a region such as Alsace, made it possible to relativise the Balkan regional context, and to put it into the perspective of the overall history of Europe. The analysis of Franco-German reconciliation - presented as a case study, though without any claim to deliver it as a model - finally made it possible to evoke the conditions of possibility of the experience of getting beyond conflicts, shedding light in particular on "the victim's right to forget and the agent's responsibility to remember".

Nevertheless, the students' considerable difficulty in transposing early twentieth-century European history onto the regional scale in the 1990s must be pointed out: they had trouble grasping in what way the solutions to the problems stemming from World War II could be of interest in thinking through the contemporary history of their region.

The "fetishising" of the past by science, including archaeology, or institutions such as museums also sparked keen interest amongst the participants, opening a new field of reflection on the social and political stakes of memory and forgetting.

Individual trajectories, collective trajectories

The screening of documentary films (on World War II, the Communist past, Greek-Turkish relations, the wars in the former Yugoslavia), followed by debates, also enriched the programme in a constructive manner, in the sense that they enabled the students to break down their apprehensions to speak out (to avoid conflict within the group), tackle realities head on, and to state their point of view.

The students had been asked to produce, prior to their arrival in Strasbourg, a personal work on their own relationship to the past, in the form of written, photographic and video documents. These works were presented, giving everyone the opportunity to contextualise their own approach to the general theme. When the works were all put together, however, and during the discussion periods and the hanging of an exhibition of their photographs, the students' were noticed to have great difficulty in organising themselves and in giving a common thread to their various contributions.

The workshop sessions nevertheless made it possible to bring a certain number of courserelated notions into debate: identity, democracy, nationality, borders, Europe, globalisation, and above all the question of individual responsibility, which was directly or indirectly recurrent throughout most of the summer university.

At the end of the session, the students were asked to submit a personal reflection, written in French, on one of the two following themes: 1) Individual history, collective history: two histories? 2) For a future of exchange and dialogue: defining a relationship toward the past. Some of these texts bear witness to a progression in reflection over the course of the three-week session, and above all to a genuine individual capacity of selfquestioning. In a more general sense, these texts had the merit of raising numerous questions that they left unanswered, and to shed light on the plurality of possible

interpretations and ways of approaching the issues.

Amongst the questions which were left very much open-ended - often because they emerged toward the end of the session, in the course of the final debates - was the considerable interest in the construction of Europe, the role of civil society and its real margins of manoeuvre, and democratic participation.

In spite of the project's longevity, the MBU summer university was once again enhanced by the thorough-going intellectual mobilisation of the teaching staff, the extremely conscientious and warm hospitality of the teams from the Department of Philosophy, Linguistics, Computer and Educational Sciences and the Chancellor's office, and by the particularly generous commitment of other Strasbourg academics and cultural leaders. In particular, the contribution of the Maison de l'image, in terms of the programming of documentary films, is to be commended.

Content of the synopsis prepared by Ana Samardzija and Sébastien Babaud

Speakers

Roselyne Baffet, Lecturer in comparative literature, Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg ; *Mrdjan Bajic*, Visual artist, Belgrade ; *Marek Beylin*, Journalist, Gazeta Wyborcza, Warsaw ; *Ulrich Bielefeld*, Researcher in sociology, Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, Hamburg ; *Ivan Colovic*, Writer, ethnologist, Belgrade ; *Liliana Dejanova*, Lecturer in sociology, Sofia University ; *Jean-Louis Déotte*, Lecturer in aesthetics, philosophy department of the University of Paris VIII, Paris ; *Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes*, Director, Transeuropéennes, Paris ; *Georges Heck*, Director, Maison de l'image, Strasbourg ; *Didier Laroche*, Archeologist, professor at the School of Architecture, Strasbourg ; *Jean-Luc Nancy*, Professor of philosophy, Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg ; *Daniel Payot*, Professor of philosophy, Chancellor of the Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg ; *Freddy Raphaël*, Professor of sociology, Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg ; *Jacques Rizzotti*, Architect, Strasbourg ; *Maurice Sachot*, Professor of education, director of the Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Education Sciences at the Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg ; *Dubravko Skiljan*, Professor of Linguistics, Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis (Zagreb/Ljubljana).

Partners and teams

Marc Bloch University, Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Education Sciences.

Co-directors : Roselyne Baffet, Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes.

Programme advisors : Ivan Colovic (scientific co-ordinator), Jean-Louis Flecniakoska, Georges Heck, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Daniel Payot, Maurice Sachot.

Project co-ordinators: Sandra Aïdara and Ana Samardzija.

Documentary film programming: Georges Heck, Maison de l'image.

Coordination: Sébastien Babaud, Ana Samardzija, with the contribution of Sanja Lucquet-Basaric and Gökhan Soydas.
As well as: Maison de l'image.

Notes
