Inauguration of the Research Cluster for the Study of East Central Europe and the History of Transformations (RECET)

18.04.2018, Campus Altes AKH der Universität Wien

RECET, the Research Cluster for the Study of East Central Europe and the History of Transformations at the Institute of East European History, University of Vienna, which had emerged in autumn 2017 as an informal group of researchers, inaugurated its activity by holding a small international conference in its venues at the University’s main campus on April the 18th 2018.

The event was meant as an occasion to present this fresh academic initiative to the wider academic public – both local and international. It hosted scholars from Poland, Hungary, Germany and the UK, not to mention the diversified national backgrounds of RECET members themselves. The purpose of the conference was to reflect on research issues, concepts and methods of studying historical transformations. The Cluster, as stated by its principal initiator Philipp Ther in his introductory remarks, was set up as a hub for individual research projects which can – but do not necessarily have to – relate to each other and stimulate synergies regarding these overall research problems.

Insisting on this rather loose and open format, instead of a regular paper-by-paper conference, we decided for a more open and interactive inaugural seminar. Jan Kubik (University College London / Rutgers University) and Marta Kotwas (UCL) gave a keynote lecture on Contextual holism, culture and historicism: searching for a novel approach to (post-communist)transformations. The speakers highlighted the importance of research premises accounting for embedded agency, formal and informal institutions, trans- and subnational structures, diverse state socialisms as points of departure for non-teleological, asynchronic and complex historical path-dependencies. This resulted in a call to properly reconstruct the cultural contexts and frames of reference in relation to which historical actors pro- and react. As Kubik and Kotwas argued, this leads to questioning single master-narratives, such as “(neo)liberalization”, “Westernization” or “Europeanization”. What they proposed was instead a heuristic scheme to characterize and study (political) transformations based on three stages: the deconstruction of the old-regime, the transfer of power including shifts in discourses and dominant ideas, and the consolidation of the new regime.

This intellectual impulse provided a wide theoretical and methodological framework for vivid discussions on the conceptual problematique of studying historical transformations. The latter
was then critically discussed with regard to the concrete historical research projects conducted by RECET members, postdocs and doctoral students: Mojmir STRANSKY, Stephanie WEISMANN, Fredrik STÖCKER, Dean VULETIC, Rinna KULLAA, Aga PASIEKA, Piotr FILIPKOWSKI, Matthias KALTENBRUNNER, Joanna ROZMUS and Lukas BECHT. Their short problem focused interventions were gathered in two sections, an “ontological” one titled *What is Transformation? New and Old Fields of Inquiry*, chaired by Prof. Peter Becker of the Institute of Austrian Historical Research, and an “epistemological” one titled *Research Methodology and the Question of Interdisciplinarity*, chaired by Prof. Claudia Craft of the Institute for Contemporary History of the University of Vienna.

These presentations were followed by critical but friendly comments and vivid discussions with the public. They lasted long into the evening and were accompanied, once the official part was finished, by a musical programme based on the research by Dean Vuletic.

**Program:**

Keynote address: Prof. Jan Kubik (University College London/Rutgers University) / Marta Kotwas, M.A. (University College London): Contextual holism, culture and historicism: searching for a novel approach to (post-communist) transformations

Panel I: What is transformation? New and old fields of inquiry (Chair: Prof. Peter Becker, IfÖG)

Short statements:
Fredrik Stöcker: Economic Ideas in Reform in (post)socialist Europe
Rinna Kullaa: International Relations and the Postcommunist World Order
Mojmir Stransky: Volunteering and Civil Society
Stephanie Weismann: Sensory Studies meet Urban History
Dean Vuletic: Popular Music and Politics

Commentary: Prof. Claudia Kraft (Institut für Zeitgeschichte), Prof. Tatjana Thelen (Institut für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie)

Panel II: How to study transformation? Research methodology and the question of interdisciplinarity (Chair: Prof. Claudia Kraft, IfZ)

Short statements:
Lukas Becht: Past Futures and the Transformation of Knowledge
Matthias Kaltenbrunner: Court Records as Forgotten Sources of the 1990s
Piotr Filipkowski: Historicizing Transformation through Storytelling
Joanna Rozmus: Let the Subaltern Speak! Agency and Oral History
Aga Pasieka: Doing Participant Observation of the Past

Commentary: Prof. Alexandra Schwell (Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt); Prof. Jan Kubik (University College London/Rutgers University)