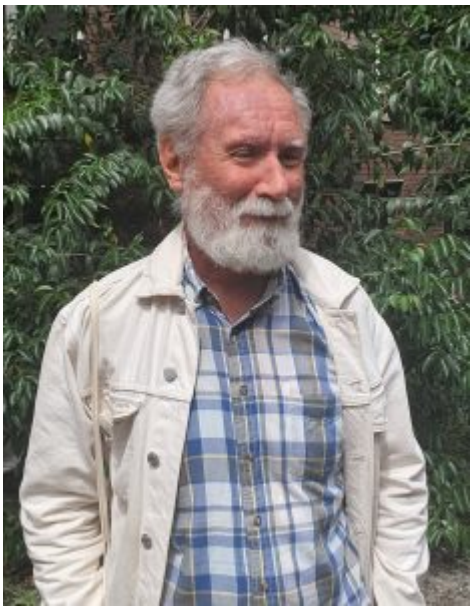
Thinking of the Balkans as a whole? Interview with Bernard Lory, historian of margins and mediation

Description

A historian of the margins and mediation, Bernard Lory has profoundly renewed the academic approach to the Balkans at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO) by combining historical rigor, dialogue between languages, and a cross-disciplinary view of identities.



From Bitola to the gypsy condition, from environmental history to literary translation, Bernard Lory outlines a patient, cross-disciplinary, and resolutely humanist Balkanological method. This interview looks back over a singular career, shaped by curiosity, doubt, and the desire to think about the region as a whole.

How have you developed a teaching approach for the Balkans that avoids identity-based divisions while acknowledging the region's complex and conflicting heritages?

Bernard Lory: For a long time, civilisation was taught at INALCO simply as a linguistic complement. My predecessor, Georges Castellan, introduced the area studies approach, which presented the challenge of getting students of Greek and Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, and Albanian to converse with each other in the same classroom. Every year, some of them come to test whether I'm pro-Serbian or pro-Croat. It's up to me to show them that the history seen from France is not that of the national textbooks of the region.

Rigour in names and pronunciations is essential. And honesty too: it's better to explain the different points of view before putting forward your own, in third place. Moving from the capitals to the villages, from grand narratives to practices: in the face of anthropology, even the most nationalistic must recognize a cultural background common to the Balkans. One year at university is enough to make this clear. We are not at the mercy of three-minute formats.

At what point did you realise that the key to "understanding everything" was to go beyond the national framework and adopt a Balkan regional approach?

You don't become a Balkanist from the start. You always start with a particular country or people with whom you establish a bond. In my case, it was Bulgaria. I discovered it when I was fifteen, naively wanting to know everything there was to know about this little-known country. At INALCO, I learnt the language and was able to *"do without the smugglers,"* those blurred intermediaries between East and West, often carrying ideological filters. The most insidious being: *"If you love our people, then you must hate our neighbours."*

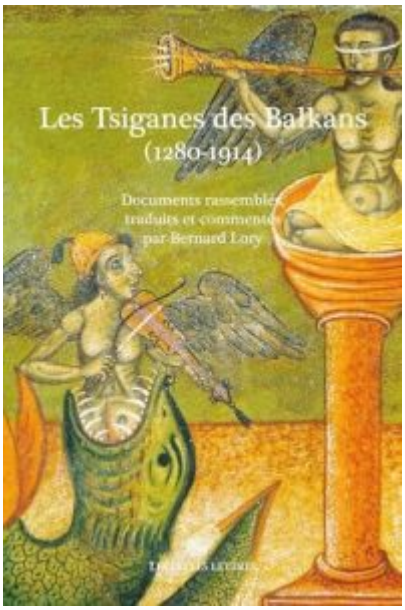
Rather than take the classic Paris IV route into Old Slavic, I chose Macedonian – never mentioned in three years of Bulgarian. It was the revelation of *'the same and at the same time different,'* one of the keys to the Balkanological approach.

I can't say when the idea came over me that, if I wanted to 'understand everything', I would have to go beyond the national framework and move on to the regional scale. A slightly mad ambition, no doubt – too many languages, too many splinters – but driven by the conviction that the human sciences form a continuum. Applied to the Balkans, this approach enables us to move beyond the dominant political narratives and adopt a broader perspective.

Why did you choose to devote your thesis to Bitola, a little-known but highly symbolic town, and what does it reveal about the dynamics of coexistence and break-up in the Balkans?

In the 1990s, the Balkans were at the forefront of global news, and there was a strong demand for Balkanologists. I took part in various projects, sometimes within frameworks that were not my own. It wasn't my 'core' research. I was then free to choose my habilitation subject: Bitola, situated at the crossroads of maximalist nationalism, a city overlooked by researchers yet exemplary of cohabitation and fractures. The result was a vast monograph on its precarious equilibrium, culminating in its geopolitical downgrading, *La ville balkanissime, Bitola, 1800-1918* (Istanbul, Ed. Isis, 2011).

Another late but exciting project is the Gypsies, who have been largely forgotten in Balkan historiography. I had to realise that no serious synthesis had been devoted to them, even though they are one of the region's historic peoples. The sources do exist, but they are sparse, fragmented, often technical, and, above all, written in languages that I do not read: Byzantine Greek, Ottoman Turkish, Old Slavonic, or Gothic German. Rather than turn my back on them, I chose a shaky but pragmatic path: using intermediate translations—Bulgarian, Bosnian, and Macedonian—to bring these texts down to a common denominator accessible in the French language. The result is a kind of mosaic, 157 pieces in all, brought together *in* *Les Tsiganes des Balkans (1280-1914)* (Les Belles Lettres, 2024). It's an atypical work, a little outside the academic framework. I don't know whether it will be a seminal work, but it at least attempts to open up a field that has remained marginal for too long.



How does your foray into environmental history, particularly through the domestic buffalo, renew your view of Balkan societies?

Balkan research must open up to environmental history. However, the classical historian is quick to recognize how much they lack to embark on this path. I ventured, with great trepidation, into the library of the Museum of Natural History and was fascinated by the botanists and geologists who visited the Balkans in the 19th century, or by the collaboration between ornithologists that was never interrupted by the Iron Curtain…

I finally followed my Braudelian training by writing a history of the *domestic buffalo* in the Balkans. Why did this animal, common in Asia, only gain a foothold in Europe in the Balkans (and southern Italy)? What functions did it fulfil in Balkan societies? In the 1930s, the herd numbered some 700,000 head, with significant regional disparities. Today, the herd has dwindled, and it's uncertain whether the recent popularity of *mozzarella di bufala* will save it. All sorts of fascinating questions! I'm looking for a publisher…

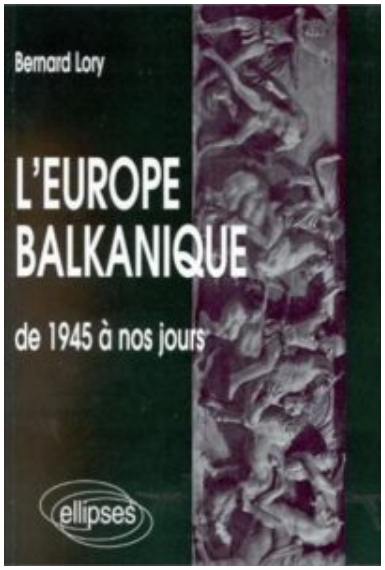
In a context marked by painful memories and disputed allegiances, how are you managing to preserve the university as a place for dialogue?

I've always really enjoyed teaching. I remember one student who came up to me at the end of the year and said, *"I'd helped her a lot."* The word surprised me. Her father, a factory worker from Greece, had never spoken of his origins. She had learned Greek at INALCO, only to discover in the village that they spoke Slavo-Macedonian—an identity repressed by the Greek state throughout the 20th century. Had she learnt the *"language of the enemy?"* My course had enabled her to envisage a common Balkan culture, expressed in a variety of languages.

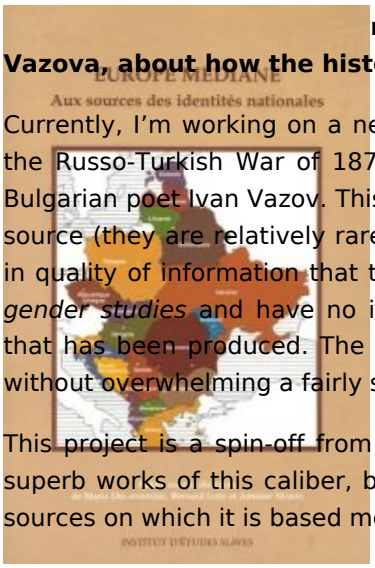
I would warn against taking a bookish approach to the Balkans. You have to go there. Listen, without believing everything. Cross borders. Start again somewhere else. And, in the end, form your own opinion.

How do you see the balance between scientific depth and accessibility for a wider audience?

I'm very proud of my work on Bitola and the Gypsies, where I think I've done my best as a researcher. But these are books of 888 and 680 pages respectively, and it's not easy to find a readership for such formats. I received significantly more recognition from my readers for L'Europe balkanique de 1945 à nos jours (Paris: Ellipses, 1995), a popular work that is certainly well done, but not particularly original.



I want to invite readers of *Regard sur l'Est* to discover the short stories by Živko Čingo: Paskvelija. *Aux quatre vents de Macédoine* (Paris, Ed. Non Lieu, 2021), which I enjoyed translating, in a courtyard under the cherry tree in Resen, with my friend Nade Proeva – recently deceased – whom I forced to mime the scenes to find the most appropriate French verb.



ranslating a woman's account, like that of Săba Vazova, about how the history of the Balkans is written?

Currently, I'm working on a new historian-translator project involving the memoirs of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 by Săba Vazova, the mother of the renowned Bulgarian poet Ivan Vazov. This is the first time I have come face-to-face with a female source (they are relatively rare in the Balkans), and I appreciate the subtle difference in quality of information that this implies. At the same time, I remain reserved about *gender studies* and have no intention of delving into the thick theoretical literature that has been produced. The challenge here is to construct a scholarly commentary without overwhelming a fairly slim work (30 pages).

This project is a spin-off from another, on autobiographies. Bulgarian literature encompasses a substantial number of superb works of this caliber, but historians are hesitant to incorporate them into their studies. Once again, the type of sources on which it is based modifies the researcher's approach.

How do you reconcile your taste for detailed analysis of individual cases with the – sometimes frustrating – need to produce overall summaries of the region?

The question of synthesis is a somewhat painful one for researchers because they recognise its usefulness, but it is a rather thankless genre. A team of researchers at CETOBAC (EHESS) is currently working on a book on the Balkans in the 19th and 21st centuries, to which I am contributing.

I'm a man of the written word, for whom illustration is a secondary aspect, sometimes welcome, but often distracting from the objective. During the 1990s, we were constantly reminded of the Balkans through the 'shock' covers of Le Petit Journal (circa 1900) and Plantu's caricatures in Le Monde. However, no one questioned the messages conveyed by these images, which were riddled with prejudice.

Why do you place so much emphasis on the early learning of several languages, and why do you think this is an essential prerequisite for rigorous research on the Balkans?

The best advice is: learn as many languages as you can while your memory is still fresh. The bare minimum: two international languages and two Balkan languages. A single local language is not enough; on the contrary, it locks you into a subtle trap. English doesn't do you much good in the field.

My main regret is that I took two years of Turkish and dropped out before I reached the level of fluency required to continue on my own. I'm aware that this deprives me of an important key.

Photos: Bernard LORY at Inalco (© Assen SLIM)

Link to the French version of the article

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