

The Image of History as a Playground

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Abstract

This study analyzes the problem of history seen as a playground between two different worlds: Eastern and Western Europe. The article draws attention to the relation between the two European regions from the cultural and historical point of view. The two areas may be also seen as two naughty children who consider history a playground. They are the children of history who easily forget that any game implies a certain number of rules and try to disobey them. But any game also implies dialogue between the parts involved. The dialogue between them represents an exchange of words, concepts, attitudes, languages. At the end of the game this particular part of Europe will have its own history made of all the other national histories, its own culture made of all the other national cultures. The Central Europe is the area that was based on multiculturalism that came from the trans-cultural vision of the world.

Keywords: *History, dialogue, identity, the other, Europe, Mitteleuropa.*

The purpose of history

One of the purposes of history is to identify a specific feature of a nation, meaning to find its own place in the whole history in order to become an object to be studied and a resource for the next generations. History was always a provocation and it was meant, among other aims, to establish a particular relationship with other subjects related to history.

Most of the times, history was an instrument of self-knowledge, that used the entire experience of the ancestors in order to express the social and national identity of a nation.¹ Most of the nations have a pragmatic attitude towards past and a specific way of keeping the past a considerable resource for the present days. But, if the past was distorted, then the national identity was distorted too. As in a chain reaction, the identity of any nation, distorted or not, influences other nations

¹ Alexandru Zub, *Istorie și finalitate* (History and Fatality) (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 18.

and their identity. This was the process that happened in the central part of Europe during time.

For centuries this space, broken into pieces, had its frontiers changed so many times and its inhabitants mixed with other minorities. In this case, the problem of identity was the red line that passes the whole history of this part of Europe.

The Concept of Central Europe

The concept of central Europe is based on the idea that it refers to a region situated somewhere in the middle of the continent, somewhere between other areas, but Central Europe, as an autonomous entity, is impossible to define because it never existed. It was always referred to as an intersection of different cultures and civilizations. Since it was used for the first time, this concept was considered a project that continuously changed its form.²

From the geographical point of view, Central Europe was considered a transitory region between the Eastern part of the continent and the Western part. According to the classical definition that comes from the Middle Ages, this part of the continent represents an area that was situated inside the old borders of the Saint Roman-German Empire. At the end of the fourth century, the Second Roman Empire was divided in two distinct parts. The Carolingian monarchy consolidated only the Western part of the previous empire. The Eastern part of the empire had always uncertain limits. Thus, its traditional limits were the river Rhine in the West, the rivers Po and Danube in the South, the river Vistula in the East, the Baltic Sea in the North and the Adriatic Sea and Carpathian Mountains in the South-East. At the beginning, the region of Central Europe included the German principalities, the North of Italy, Bohemia, the Netherlands, Hungary and sometimes, by extension, Poland. After the peace from Westphalia was signed, the shape of Central Europe started to change, excluding the North of Italy and the Netherlands, but keeping Poland as an important state of the region.

It was considered that the distinction between the West and the East was an artificial creation of the Cold War, as well as the Iron Curtain drawn over a single cultural area.³ But it was not entirely like that. In the nineteenth century, after the Habsburgs obtained an effective authority over the territories which stretched to Ukraine, the Austrian chancellor Mitternich, in one of his discourses, proudly

² Adrian Pop, "Conceptul de Europa Centrală" (Concept of Central Europe), *Sfera Politicii* 28, June (1995): 32.

³ Tony Judt, *Europa iluziilor* (The Europe of Illusions) (Iași: Polirom, 2000), 168.

spoke about Asia starting from Landstrasse, the road that began in Vienna and moves forward to the East.⁴ Larry Wolff read about the Englishman Edward Brown who travelled through the Habsburg territories in 1669, and noticed that when someone passed Buda it was like plunging into a totally different world.⁵ Whatever the sources of their prejudices were, both the Austrian and the Englishman distinguished an invisible border between the North and the South drawn through the middle of the European continent.

The concept of Central Europe is a modern one. It could not have appeared before the political and economical reforms applied by Joseph the Second of Austria starting with 1780, and it was nearly destroyed after the peace of Versailles and the Nazis destroyed it completely. The past that stands for the Central Europe is that during the Habsburg Empire, when Prague and Budapest develop, or other important towns, such as Zagreb and Lvov became important cities. For the rest of Europe, the distinction between East and West before 1848 or after 1945 was not clear at all.

The beginning of the communist regimes in the Central Europe was an action very well prepared by the Soviet leaders. Before 1945 there were twelve national subsidiaries of Komintern, among which the German, the Polish, the Czech, the Slovak, the Hungarian, the Romanian, the Bulgarian and so on. After the military occupation, the Soviet Union began to impose the communist regime to these countries.⁶ Starting with 1945, Poland and Yugoslavia became the first communist countries, followed by Bulgaria and Hungary in 1946, by Romania in 1947, by Czechoslovakia in 1948 and by the German Democratic Republic in 1948.

The end of the communist regimes was determined by the two political changes: the perestroika, meaning restructure, and glasnost, meaning transparency. Both were promoted by the Soviet leader Gorbachev and they were the first steps in destroying the communist era.

At the beginning the 90s, the most important aspect of the concept of Central Europe was linked to the problem of security in this region. The new issue was determined by the conflicts that lead to the civil war in the former Yugoslavia and, also by the disputes in the former Czechoslovakia. Relating to the new historical context, a new political evaluation has been made regarding the European

⁴ Judt, *Europa iluziilor*, 169.

⁵ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford Edition, 1994), 41.

⁶ Jean Francois Soulet, *Istoria comparată a statelor comuniste: din 1945 până în zilele noastre* (Comparative history of communist states: from 1945 to nowadays) (Iași: Polirom, 1998), 21.

solidarity similar to the peace treaties in Paris (1919-1920). Thus, the Central and Eastern Europe is considered, from now on, the region that gathers all the territories situated between the UE borders and Russia.⁷ But what exactly are the limits of the Central Europe territory is difficult to establish, or it could be easier to take into account Kundera's point of view, according to which Central Europe is the region situated geographically in the centre of Europe, culturally in the West and politically in the East.

Thus, Central Europe is more a political concept than a region geographically delimited. Most of the time, Central Europe was defined mainly from the perspective of the person who gives the definition and not from other neutral points of view.⁸ From this point on, talking about Central Europe must be done in terms of cultural identity, because this region is based on a mixture of several different cultures and civilizations that transcend one another in a final multicultural context.

The Search for Identity

To discuss the problem of identity for the Central Europe is a complex issue. For hundreds of years, the nations that belonged to this part of Europe had common roots with the Roman Christianity. All of them took their part in the all important events in the European history. For them, being European does not represent only a geographic phenomenon, but also a spiritual notion. The Central Europe was like a family of small nations with the same vision of the world, which was based on the fact that they share the same concepts, the same traditions and the same attitudes. Irony, pessimism and the obsession of finding the true identity represent the main features of the Central Europe as a cultural entity.⁹ From the cultural point of view, the notion of Central Europe is impossible to be understood without knowing what it means from the historical point of view. This European area represents a huge series of national histories gathered into a transnational history. Throughout history, the idea of Central Europe depended on the idea of tolerance and multiculturalism. The Central European culture developed a combination of a strong intellectual certainty and a strong uncertainty regarding the European identity. At the same time, the Central European spirit was

⁷ Cristian Radu Chereji, "The Meaning of central Europe in the 90's," in *Central Europe after 1989*, ed. Puscas Vasile (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2000), 20.

⁸ Michel Focher, "Fragmente de Europa: unificări și fragmentări" (Fragments in Europe: Unions and Fragmentations), in *Europa Centrală: nevroze, dileme, utopii* (Central Europe: Neurosis, Dilemmas and Utopias), ed. Adriana Babeți and Cornel Ungureanu (Iași: Polirom, 1997), 101.

⁹ Judt, *Europa iluziilor*, 152.

considered an attitude, a vision over the world, a certain type of aesthetic sensibility that always took into account the complexity and the multi-linguistic approach that could be described as a way of accepting the pluralism as a cultural value. This type of attitude was described as the concept of *Mitteleuropa*.¹⁰ It represents an ideological notion, a mental map with variable frontiers according to the historical moment, an area that had the basic nucleus of the Saint Roman-German Empire.¹¹ Even if the borders of the area called *Mitteleuropa* changed over time, the concept was always seen as the cultural matrix for the Central Europe.¹²

The cartography of the Central Europe identity never ceased to change itself according to the rhythm of the historical events. Europe was divided into two entities after the Second World War, each having its own history. On one side, there was the Western Europe, starting to shape itself creating new symbols, and on the other side, the communist Europe, starting to create a new world over the old one. The new communist part of Europe was made of several nations that were kept in isolation from one another and from the other part of the continent. But Central Europe, as a cultural entity, could not be kept in complete isolation, it always depended on its relationship with other regions.¹³ This was the space where the Russian Orient met the European Occident. This was the playground where East plays with the West, where they try to create some sort of a dialogue, which was totally different from the dialogue between the moderns and the antiques or between an adult and a child. When these cultural regions created certain relationships between them based on their memories, thoughts, attitudes, visions over their common destiny, that means they had to put together the myth of the margins with the myth of the central part of the continent. The East looked at the West and the West looked at itself. Later on the East turned its face from the West imposing a cruel division between them. The curtain that separated the two parts of the same continent was an artificial creation of the Cold War that divided the same cultural area. The Central Europe was caught in the middle of the war.

The real tragedy of Central Europe was not related to Russia, because after the falling of Austrian Empire, this part of Europe was put under the influence of Russia, but it was related to Europe itself. Europe was always seen as an important

¹⁰ The term was first used by Friedrich Naumann in his book, *Mitteleuropa*, which was first published at the beginning of the First World War, in 1915.

¹¹ Jacques Le Rider, *Mitteleuropa* (Iași: Polirom, 1997), 18-19.

¹² Tony Judt, "Redescoperirea Europei Centrale" (Rediscovery of Central Europe), in *Europa Centrală: nevroze, dileme, utopii* (Central Europe: Neurosis, Dilemmas and Utopias), 19.

¹³ Chantal Delsol and Michel Maslowski, *Mituri și simboluri politice în Europa Centrală* (Myths and Symbols in Central Europe) (Chișinău: Cartier, 2003), 474.

value by the Central Europeans, so important that the director of the Hungarian News Agency was ready to die for, in November 1956, behind the Iron Curtain.¹⁴ As Milan Kundera considered, when the Iron Curtain fell, the nations of the Central Europe finally understood that this region ceased to be considered an important value by the European themselves. Things changed too much so that Europe stopped being interested in this part of the continent because it became impossible to understand it. The literary works of Herman Broch, Robert Musil, Jaroslav Hasek or Milan Kundera prove this idea. For most of the writers that come from the central part of Europe, to live in the centre means to live nowhere: never to live in the East, which never existed, nor in the West that already existed too much; being nowhere means living in the middle, and the middle becomes the only real ground. Central Europe is nothing else but a region that is geographically situated in the middle, culturally in the West and politically in the East.¹⁵ The identity of any Central European is impossible not to be based on multiculturalism but also on transculturalism.

Central Europe as a Cultural Entity

Even if it seems impossible, or at least very difficult, to establish which are the limits of the Central Europe territory, to find a common matrix that could stand for its history, geography, politics and culture, there are some common features. Central Europe is not a geo-political or geo-cultural notion easily accepted by anyone, but it is the area where the dichotomy between East and West can be noticed. Anyhow, some historical events were considered specific for this particular region of Europe: the late foundation of the national state and also the late formation of a national political culture. In the Central European context, the differences between the national cultures are more important than their similarities because the diversities represent the main factor of cohabitation for each and every country from this region.¹⁶ There is also a common spirit for all those nations from the central part of Europe.¹⁷ This spirit was based on the different cultural perspectives but with few cultural common characteristics.

¹⁴ Milan Kundera, "Tragedia Europei Centrale" (The Tragedy of Central Europe), in *Europa Centrală: nevroze, dileme, utopii*, 221.

¹⁵ Kundera, "Tragedia Europei Centrale," 221.

¹⁶ Markus Reisenleitner, "Tradition, Cultural Boundaries and the Constructions of Space of Identity," *Spaces of Identity* 1, (1) February (2001): 10.

¹⁷ This spirit was considered to have sprung from the cohabitation of different nations inside the Habsburg monarchy.

First of all, the cultural common features of Central Europe were considered to be the irony, the pessimism and the obsession of identity. Irony, developed at the historical level, appeared in the relationship between the individual and any form of state authority. It could also be a common source of comedy or tragedy for most of the Central European writers, starting with Kafka and ending with Kundera. Pessimism represents a manner of writing. It belongs mostly to the form and not the content. It follows a particular thought, sentiment, emotion throughout several pages, as it can be seen in Mrojek's literary works.

One of the major characteristics of the Central Europe cultural matrix is the obsession of identity. This obsession may explain why the national culture became extremely important but why the same national culture is not able to resist the other national cultures. Finding your own identity, as an individual and as a nation, represents a symptom of the modern world. Identity as a concept alone ceased to exist. It can only be defined in relation with other identities, individual or national. No one can discover the individual identity if it was not related to the identity of the others, the same thing happens with the national identity. In the modern world everything is in relation with everything. Life and history itself are just a game of building and deconstructing the entire system of identification.

The Central European identity was defined only in relation with the other European identities. Besides the common features that were already mentioned, there is also a common language imposed by the political factor, and that was the German language. German functioned as a *lingua franca* of a region divided in multiple linguistic and national areas. The most known literary works of the nineteenth century that came from this particular region were written in German, whatever the nationality of the writer was. The most known example is represented by Kafka's works. Starting with the twentieth century, another language started to spread in the area and that was French. It was the language used mainly by the communities from the exiles who want their national liberation from the old Habsburg or Prussian domination and this fact led to a decrease of the importance of the German language.¹⁸ At the same time, after 1919 the national languages increased their importance in the region and that led to the disappearance of an important integrating factor for all these nations.

The beginning of the twentieth century may be characterized by a peaceful atmosphere in a certain part of the region, influenced by the Viennese spirit of the

¹⁸ Jacques Le Rider, "Europa Centrală sau paradoxul fragilității" (Central Europe and the Paradox of Fragility), in *Europa Centrală* (Central Europe), ed. Dana Chetrescu and Ciprian Vâlcă (Iași: Polirom, 2001), 124.

Austrian-Hungarian Empire. But when the empire started to disintegrate at the beginning of the First World War, the peaceful atmosphere was also dissolved. The concept of Central Europe was less and less used in the academic and diplomatic fields, and till the end of the Second World War it was destroyed by the communist regimes. Thus, all the countries belonging to the region were put under the influence of the totalitarian dictatorship. The cultural and ethnic diversity that was implied by the Central European concept was replaced by a theoretical uniformity covered by the Marxism-Leninism theories. The problem of minorities did not concern the majority anymore. Even if the communist regime tried to create a cultural uniformity using the communist ideology and the Russian language, the cultural space that corresponded to the Central and Eastern Europe remained divided on national criteria.¹⁹

The rebirth of the Central Europe culture started with 1980, when important personalities from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary launched the cultural myth of spiritual *Mittleuropa*.²⁰

For Milosz, Konrad and Kundera Central Europe represented the symbol of a certain form of civilization, of a cultural model that was destroyed by the cooperation of two totalitarian regimes, meaning the Nazism and Stalinism. Central Europe is mainly about a mental universe full of irony and pessimism. Central Europe is also a territory of a lot of tensions mixed with tolerance.²¹ It cannot be mentioned the fact that this was the area where all the new modern artistic currents sprung from, such as the Dadaism or the Expressionism.

The most important feature of the spiritual *Mittleuropa* myth is the historical conscience, related to the past but also to the present. It seems that it is able to develop a huge series of literary themes, and not only the historical themes. Most of the characters that live their literary lives inside the literary space created by most of the Central European writers have some specific features. The time shaped their lives, as the real time shaped the real lives of real people. It is a totally different time than the one of the Western European writers. The political events that belong to the time when these characters lived are the same events that shaped the time when the authors of the same characters lived and developed themselves. That is why, in most cases, these political events create the background for any

¹⁹ Each nation of this region tried to delimit its culture from the Soviet influence. In the Central Europe area the tendency was to separate the Western Slavs and the Non-Slavs from the Slav culture of the Soviet Union.

²⁰ Among these important Central European personalities were Vaclav Havel, Milan Kundera, Czeslaw Milosz, Danilo Kis, Mihaly Vajda, Gyorgy Konrad.

²¹ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Mizeria utopiei: Criza ideologiei marxiste în Europa de Est* (The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Eastern Europe: The Poverty of Utopia) (Iași: Polirom, 1997), 87.

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type of story and mingle history with present life, while time is considered neutral by the Western European writers. The examples are plenty. In Hermann Broch's novel "The Sleep Walker" history appears as a process of gradual disintegration of all the moral values. The novel "The Man without the Face" written by Robert Musil describes a euphoric society which is unable to realize that tomorrow is its last day of existence. Hasek presents in his novel "The Brave Soldier Svejk" the only way of keeping the freedom of his characters by pretending of being idiot. Kafka's literary visions speak about a world without memory and without history, about a world that covers completely the historical time. There is no past and no history, as these concepts are known, in Kafka's literary universe. For Kundera history is the one that likes to play jokes on his characters, destroying first the life of one character, but, as the butterfly effect still functions, all the other characters' lives are later destroyed too. Most of the Central European literary masterpieces could be seen and understood as long meditations on the theme of the possible end of the entire humanity.²² If it is to extend this idea to the cultural level, it will become very easy to notice that most of the Central European cultures were against the political structures imposed by the regimes that tried to conquer this region. That became the most important aspect of the Central European culture.

The conclusion

Central Europe represents a particular phenomenon in the history of the European continent. It is a space with variable borders, with different national histories gathered in a transnational history, with a specific culture characterized mainly by multiculturalism. Central Europe always tried to become an important part of the European continent.

For the Central European space, history was nothing but a playground where the West played with the East, shaping its form according to the historical moment. If the two bad children are taken out of the playground, there will remain only the empty space. For the Central European individual living in the centre means living nowhere. To be Central European means never to live in the East, the space that never existed, and never to live in the West, the space that existed too much.²³ For the East and also for the West Central Europe is just an imaginary place, an illusion, a myth.

²² Kundera, "Tragedia Europei Centrale," 231.

²³ Andrzej Kusniewicz, *Lección de limbă moartă* (The Lesson of Dead Language) (Bucharest: Univers, 1998), 349.

The Central European myth could be also understood as another call for the refused belonging to the most important part of the continent. The Central European identity was influenced by a series of negations that lead to the impossibility of finding the true and real identity, because the Central European individual is not Russian, nor orthodox, he is not Turkish nor Hungarian or German. The Central European identity is beyond any national identity, because the Central European individual is German and Polish and Hungarian and Czech and Slovak, etc. Each national identity represents the basis of the Central European identity. Each national culture is considered an important part of the Central European multiculturalism. When the boundaries do not count any more, the entire European culture might become a multicultural matrix based on all the national cultures that belonged to the European continent.

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