The postcolonial hypothesis

Notes on the Czech “Central European” Identity

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Abstract

The article discusses the application of postcolonial theory to the post-communist situation, something that a number of authors are attempting to do – most notably Ewa Thompson, who connects this analysis with a cultural and political project for contemporary Poland. The article looks at the possible ways in which postcolonial perspectives can be used to analyse national identity in “Europe between Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism”, and specifically in the Czech context. It then devotes itself to a genealogical reading of Milan Kundera’s essay on Central Europe, and ends with a discussion on the usefulness of the postcolonial perspective for the analysis of post-communism. It concludes that this perspective is a fertile source of inspiration for comparative hypotheses and research questions, but that its full acceptance may be both methodologically and politically problematic. The “authenticity” of Central Europe has been constructed by the dominant Central European spokespeople in opposition to the “subaltern empires” of Germany and Russia as “more Western than the West”.

Keywords

Postcolonialism – Post-Communism – Czech national identity – Central Europe – Ewa Thompson – Milan Kundera – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

“Is it correct to say that the Czechs, for example, were occupied but the Uzbeks colonized? If so, then for the Czechs was it the period’s brevity, the absence of a tsarist legacy, their relative technological parity with the Soviet Union, their mastery of the discourse of occupation, or our unacknowledged racialization of language that drives this distinction? Indeed, the absence from 1946 to 1967 of an alien, occupying military or governance on Czech

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soil further problematizes the vocabulary... How white must one be to be occupied?"
Nancy Condee

"...an unforgettable memory of you kept coming back to me. It relates to autumn 1971. I had brought you an appeal to read in which a certain opposition politician was playing on the feelings of the Czech nation by declaring that no-one was going to treat our educated nation like the Bashkirs or the Crimean Tatars. When you read the sentence you turned red, banged your fist on the table and shouted: "NO-ONE should be treated like a slave!" I fell in love with you at that moment..."
Jan Tesař to Jaroslav Šabata, 1987

The postcolonial perspective and the study of the Czech national identity were for a long time considered largely in isolation from each other. A certain amount of demand for a postcolonial perspective came with the advent of reflection on the post-communist situation, but even here the situation was somewhat tentative – indeed, more so in the Czech Republic compared to other post-communist countries, especially Poland.[2] The following article will discuss the possibilities for the transfer of postcolonial concepts to analyses of national identities in the Central European area, with a focus on the Czech national identity. Why is it that clear postcolonial motifs have previously not been conceptualised using the language of postcolonial studies? Is the postcolonial perspective a fruitful one for the analysis of national identities in Central Europe, and specifically of the Czech identity? Do we find convincing the attempts by some Polish thinkers, such as Polish-American literary theorist Ewa Thompson, to make use of postcolonial concepts to analyse post-communism in Poland, and can this attempt be transferred to the debate on the Czech national identity and Czech post-communism?

At first sight, postcolonial moments in the Czech narrative of the national identity are fairly easy to find. By way of introduction, I offer two examples from completely different contexts:

A clear colonial image can be found in one of the most influential images of modern Czech history – during the 20th century probably the most influential image. It is one that has been frequently evoked with reference to a novel by Alois Jirásek, a key author of historical literature known as the "Czech Walter Scott", called *Darkness* (1915): foreign conquistadors enter a conquered land, divide it up amongst themselves, drive out the native aristocracy, suppress the local religion and burn Czech books… This narrative became a significant argument in debates on land redistribution and population expulsion during the 20th century (land reform after 1918, the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, the legitimisation of Communist Party dominion using fears of German "revanchism").

[2] Authors who have discussed Czech themes from a postcolonial perspective include Sušová-Salminen, 2012 and 2015, Holubec 2015, Lánský 2014 Hladík 2012, Barša 2015, Horký – Profant 2016, and Kratochvíl 2016; Švihlíková 2015 uses the rhetoric of the "colony" to analyse the economic position of the Czech Republic in global capitalism.

When the prominent Czech writer Milan Kundera entered the "Central Europe" debate in the mid-1980s and tried to identify the features of Central European identity (1984), several observers were struck by the fact that there is nothing "central" about his "Central Europe" – his "Centre is in the West" (Schulze-Wessel 1997). Central Europe, as he sees it, is a politically kidnapped part of the cultural West, and in reality is defined by two things: 1) the accepting gaze of the West, which it has lost ("*If to live means to exist in the eyes of those we love, then Central Europe no longer exists*," because the West does not register its existence); and 2) faithfulness to Western values, something at which the Central European countries have been maybe better than the West itself. In this, unlike other attitudes of his, Kundera anticipated a number of themes that have remained in the rhetoric of Central Europe up to the present day.

Various reflections on the post-communist situation have contained discussion of and comparison with the postcolonial situation.[3] The question addressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Chernetsky – Condee – Ram – Spivak 2006) to literary theorists from the post-communist countries, *"Are you postcolonial?"*, is one to which no-one has yet given a definitive answer. The most concrete and specific reaction, heading beyond the framework of literary theory and cultural studies in the direction of analysis of the national identity and also towards political thought, has come from Polish-American literary theorist Ewa Thompson. In the context of the wider "semantic revolution" and the rise of the new conservatives in Poland after 2000, she proposes that postcolonial studies be used to analyse the Polish experience. Drawing in particular on Said and Bhabha, she formulates four main elements of the postcolonial situation: 1) *poverty*, which hinders the building of strong institutions and an autonomous culture; 2) *"African pessimism"* (which, she suggests, should be renamed post-communist pessimism), defined as the absence of positive expectations and trust in one's own society, the "bad mood"; 3) *the "necessary fictions"* of one's own past greatness, which play a comforting role in relation to the present moment; and 4) *culturalism*, which means the reduction of all the problems connected with the inferior position to "bad culture", and, as a consequence, leads to "blaming the victims", who are seen as being responsible for their problems because they were unable to rid themselves of their bad habits and change in a desirable way, to be "re-educated" (Thompson 2010a, cf. Thompson 2010b and Thompson 2014). Postcolonial rhetoric, Thompson says, enables the Polish experience to be communicated using a conceptual language that is already established in the international debate.[4]

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[3] Among the most fundamental contributions to the debate on the usefulness of the postcolonial prism for post-socialist countries is Moore 2001, Chari – Verdery 2009, Tlostanova 2012, Tlostanova 2015. The most fundamental contribution to the application of the postcolonial perspective to Central and Eastern Europe is Zarycki 2014.

[4] A nice example of the polemical use of the postcolonial figure for debate on the post-Soviet space can be found in some of Timothy Snyder's essays on the history of the Holocaust and the history of Central and Eastern Europe (2012, 2013a, 2013b).

Other answers were more sceptical. Indeed, Spivak herself, in the formulation of her question, had acknowledged the considerable difference between the post-communist world and the key regions that postcolonial theory had thus far been described. Moore then underlined and emphasised the mutual ignorance between the East and the South, and asked, even more hesitatingly: *"Can silence be theorised"* (meaning the silence of the East with regard to the South, and the South with regard to the East)? (Moore 2001). Snochowska-Gonzales, analysing the use of postcolonial theory in Poland, goes even further and argues that the theory serves a simplifying view of the history of the right-wing conservative political agenda and the use of seemingly anti-orientalist rhetoric to orientalise Russia (Snochowska-Gonzales 2012).

In our contribution to the discussion, we will develop four interconnected theses: 1) The transfer of postcolonial concepts *as an overall diagnosis of the situation* of post-communist countries can lead to drastic distortion and to epistemologically and politically problematic positions, above all because it tends towards binary constructions (above all: colonised locals versus the coloniser from outside, sometimes the colonised thought of the elites versus authentic tradition, folk culture or national identity), and towards a problematic and projective idea of lost "authenticity", and it does not allow us to see in what way the various Central European nations place each other in a (post)colonial position; 2) On the contrary, the transfer of postcolonial concepts *as hypotheses and sources of comparative questions* may provide a useful grid for comparison and reflection; 3) The relevance of postcolonialism for the post-communist situation cannot be adequately assessed without looking at *the long-term trajectories of national identities in these countries*; 4) It may prove fruitful, when investigating national identities, to investigate them individually, in themselves, and to compare them in terms of individual features (the approach taken by Miroslav Hroch in his article); however, it may also prove fruitful to take a *relational approach that looks at them in terms of their relationships* with each other.

In the following essay, we will first discuss the general possibilities of applying postcolonial approaches to Central European identities, and concretely to the Czech identity in the wider context of the development of Central European national identities in the past two hundred years. We shall then try, using a genealogical interpretation of Kundera's essays on Central Europe, to show some of the characteristics of Kundera's "Czech Central Europe". Finally, we shall discuss the possibilities of a postcolonial view of Czech and Central European post-communism.

National identities in "Europe between Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism": Notes on the dynamics of mutual orientalisation

The aim of the following section is not to provide a historical description or an exhaustive theoretical survey of the process of the formation of national identities in Central Europe. Its aim is to capture, in tersely abbreviated form, the basic relational vectors by means of which the various national identities in Central Europe have affected each other, and to discuss whether they have

had effects that approach mutual orientalisation. An analysis of the postcolonial factor in post-communist societies cannot begin with post-communism, if only because even if we were to conceptualise the epoch of the reign of the communist parties as an epoch of "foreign domination",[5] it was certainly not the first such situation in the region. An epoch of largely even more brutal foreign domination, or at least custody, was Nazism. The long period in the 19th century when the modern nations were being formed is also, as Miroslav Hroch reminds us in his article, a period when no Central European national movement – unlike in Western Europe – had its "own state". Such a situation is not necessarily colonial (and within Central Europe its actual forms also differed considerably), but it may be placed in a continuum between the sovereign nation-state and colonial subjugation (for discussion of a similar continuum see Barša 2015).

We need to be acquainted with the Central European national identities not just in comparison with each other, but also in terms of their mutual interaction. This is not just because of the banal fact that national identity is always founded on defining oneself in relation to another, and that if a state is shared with that other, then in a number of cases the mutual delimitation can be expected to be even more intense. It is also because the Central European region has reacted to two major challenges from two units which during the 19th century unrolled their imperial ambitions. The American historian Timothy Snyder has labelled this part of Europe during 1933–1945 as "Europe between Hitler and Stalin". We may, however, partially extend this characteristic (although not, of course, its intensity) into the past, and describe this part of Europe as "Europe between Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism", between two centres of power/culture and the identities they offered, with the reactions to them being of key importance in the forming of national identities. German romantic nationalism and Herder's philosophy had a particularly formative influence on the formulation of national issues in Central Europe.

Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism each contain specific elements of the colonial narrative, dominance and homogenisation. They both offer assimilation into one version or another of imperial subjectivity and cultural identity, which in one case (the German) is "more advanced" and in the other case (the Russian) is "more authentic" (for the Slavic nations of Central Europe). Both, however, are at the same time dealing with their own, semi-colonial problem: both arose in reaction to a universalist "civilisation", the universalism of which spoke French and took the practical form of Napoleon's armies (and, before that, self-orientalisation on the part of the pro-Enlightenment and Francophile absolutist monarchs Frederick II and

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[5] We can do this to a certain extent in Poland, but it means overlooking a number of aspects of Polish accommodation of this domination. It will be noticeably more difficult to do in the former Czechoslovakia, the only country in Eastern Europe to choose Stalinism in relatively free elections. In the words of Petr Pithart, in Poland and Hungary, *"socialism was clearly an export item (to an even greater extent than in Slovakia). Its acceptance was ensured by the presence of troops and the handing over of competences to pro-Soviet forces, competences taken from their own nations. None of this was necessary in Slovakia, because everything was taken care of by the Czechs."* (1990, 105).

Catherine II and the Francophile intelligentsia). German nationalism, which to a certain extent became paradigmatic for Central European nationalisms, was also a paradigmatically romantic, anti-Western (in the sense of anti-Enlightenment) nationalism. *Kultur* and *Ethnos*, allegedly imbued with deep folk authenticity, were mobilised against the violence of the "civilisation" of universal reason and the French nation (cf. Sternhell 2010, Elias, 1969, Berlin 2000, Buruma – Margalit 2004, Barša 2001). The Russian concept of national identity, extended in the Slavophile concept to the Slavs as a whole, is based on different values, but it shares with German nationalism and Pan-Germanism a common idea of depth, authenticity, folk sources, an imperial underlay and a possible inclination to racism (this time Slavic). It is influenced to a considerable extent by German nationalistic romanticism (cf. Nykl 2015, Putna 2014, Buruma – Margalit 2004, Morozov 2015).

Both nationalisms possess, of course, both factions: the essentialist and the epochalist, to borrow Geertz's terminology from his analysis of third world nationalisms (1973, 234-254). In the period terminology of Russian nationalism, the factions are the "Slavophile" and "Zapadnik", or, in the German context, "National Liberal" and "Romantic". Defining themselves in terms of Western "civilisation" was often for them a way of accepting its key elements, including the national form. In terms of Central Europe, German nationalism was able to play the role of a civilisational alternative to the West, and also the role of a Westerniser. Even during the phase when the victorious faction in German nationalism was at its most radical and had moved completely away from the universalist ethos characteristic of "French" civilisation (1933-1945), it was, at least in its propaganda, able to pose in the role of "defender of the West" from "Asiatic barbarism". (The convincingness of this attempt to legitimise the unlegitimisable can be seen in some of the echoes of this idea, for example in Nolte's discussion contributions in Historikerstreit; see Nolte in Piper 1993). Finally, even the Russian Empire played the role of mediator of certain Western values to some of its parts. The two German campaigns against Russia that formed a key part of the two world wars were to a large extent connected with the rhetoric of Western colonialism towards the backward Slavs. Stalin repelled the second of them not only with the rhetoric of Pan-Slavism and defence in the "second great war against the Slavs", but also with the rhetoric of the defence of universal civilisational values against German "barbarism". It is also possible to see the very existence of the USSR as a project of Russian self-colonisation by one faction, the "Westernisers".

Viatcheslav Morozov analyses Russia as a "subaltern empire", and in this label summarises a paradox: Russia was also an imperial power in relation to a number of societies, and at the same time a "backwards" and "lately arrived" object of orientalisation from the point of view of the Western European centre (cf. 2015). There was a significant difference between Germany and Russia in the extent to which they were "subaltern". But in a certain sense, German nationalism, too, had certain elements that made it "subaltern". We can thus also in a certain sense understand Central Europe as a space between two subaltern empires.

Russian and German nationalism, which gradually transformed into Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism and subsequently fused with two totalitarian regimes, may, for a roughly defined period between 1815 and 1948, be labelled a basic structural determinant for the development of national identities in other countries. Even where they were not felt by means of direct dominance (the problem of Poland, in particular), they offered a strong identity and basic model. At the same time, they represented a basic threat: the victory of one of these two imperial nationalisms would lead to the suppression or assimilation of smaller nationalisms, which is why it was seen as being of key importance to define oneself in relation to them. The Czech “father of the nation” František Palacký defined the identity of his nation not only by writing its history, but also by refusal, in his “Letter to Frankfurt” (1848), of an invitation to come to the Frankfurt National Assembly to represent the Czech lands as part of the German nation, as well as being critical of Pan-Slavism and the idea of a “universal Russian monarchy”.

Here, then, we have a basic setting that poses a considerable paradox: the basic “colonialising” and orientalising challenge is represented by nationalisms that are in large part formed by their own fear of colonisation/orientalisation and resistance to it. An emphasis on the influence of these two nationalisms could, meanwhile, in itself easily leads to an explanation that at best romanticises the objects of colonisation by “big countries”, or, worse, sees them as mere passive objects, removing any sort of relevance from their agency. Just as the nations between Germany and Russia defined themselves with regard to the empires on each edge of Central Europe, so they defined themselves with regard to each other – and not only symmetrically, but also hierarchically. The colonised were also colonisers, and the orientalised were in the same time orientalisers (cf. Bakić-Hayden 1995; Moore 2001).

In the multi-layered and highly complex mutual relationships between the individual Central European nations, we are able to trace three strong ambivalences, both of which have a significant effect on the Czech identity:

The first ambivalence feature is that *the colonisation of one set of Central Europeans by another* takes place *in the name of modernity*. Czechs appear in Slovakia and in Transcarpathian Ruthenia as the bearers of “progress” and “civilisation”, as the builders of key institutions connected with the modern era (cf. Holý 2001; Holubec 2014). The Central European nations compete with each other as to which of them is more modern, which often means which has a more intense relationship with the Western centres of modern capitalism, with the Western states and their metropolises.

The second ambivalence is *the relationship between modernity and historicity*, since European nations – especially those which have a wealth of history to appropriate – use long-ago history to legitimise their own existence, and as an “entrance ticket” to a place among the “historic nations”. The compensatory function of this history and the important role it plays (in the Czech case, the aforementioned historian František Palacký becomes the “father of the nation” and a central political figure) would seem to show that “national history” conceived of in this way acts as the “necessary fictions” of

the sort that Thompson talks about. This idea of a fixation on history as compensation for an inferiority complex does not, however, exhaust the role of this history: it may also be the source of a feeling of equality (with the large "historic nations") and of superiority (compared to other Central European nations, which cannot point to such "great history" – cf. the relationship between the Czechs and Slovaks (Holý 2001, Pithart 1991) but sometimes also towards Western nations, to whom Polish and Czech intellectuals are sometimes able to offer a messianic role or at least a lesson derived from their own "historical experience". History can become a source of the "meaning" of the existence of a small nation, which according to Masaryk is its contribution to the intellectual life of mankind (cf. Havelka 2001). For Masaryk, this contribution, at the same time the "meaning" of Czech history, was the legacy of Czech Protestantism, which had also allowed the Czech lands to become situated further to the west than corresponded to their geographical position, and to formulate the Czech interest in falsely universalist terms. As Masaryk's pupil Herben aptly described it, paraphrasing French historian Ernst Denis: "*The Czech lands had the merit and good fortune that their cause was always in harmony with that of the whole of mankind"* (Herben in Havelka, 1995, 232).

The third ambivalence will be the tension between *independence* and *sustainability*. One of the values of national identities in Central Europe (and not only there) is originality. In the Czech discourse, one of the values is the ambivalently, but frequently positively coded characteristic of smallness (see Holý 2001, Slačálek 2010, Kundera 1984, see also below) as a source of innocence and as a counterweight to the necessary guiltiness of the powerful. Nations head towards being states, but statehood does not have to mean independence: the first choice for both Palacký and Masaryk is the preservation of Austria, or Austro-Hungary, and the realisation of Czech specificity within it. Austro-Hungary is seen as a natural and sufficiently large barrier against Russia and Germany, against Pan-Slavism and Pan-Germanism. It was not until disappointment was felt at the fact that the Czechs played the role of a second-category nation in Austro-Hungary, and above all fear that after the victorious Great War the Habsburg state group would sink into the thrall of the German Reich and Pan-Germanism and Czechs would become "helots", that Masaryk was compelled to fight for an independent state. This independence was, nevertheless, far from absolute – Czechoslovakia became something between an independent state and the protectorate of France in Central Europe (see Tesař 2001, who analyses the post-Munich trauma of the Czechs as, among other things, the result of the collapse of illusions connected to a protectorate position and the mentality of the Czechs).

The last of the vectors is the most important of its kind: in addition to orientalisation by the orientalising imperial nationalisms of the Germans and Russians, and the mutual orientalisation of the Central European nations, there is another factor at play here, and that is the relationship of these nations to the West beyond the framework of Germany, above all to the great

metropolises of France, Britain and the US. In identifying with their universalism, the Central European countries were able to find a counterweight to their immediate neighbours, and also a source of modernity. Both of these, however, may become a source of disappointment and a feeling of inferiority, which may easily approach the attitudes typical of colonised nations (a feeling of unequal struggle, intellectual dependency and inferiority, backwardness, alienation or betrayal). The full articulation of this feeling and the adoption of a postcolonial viewpoint was, however, prevented by the target vector of this attempt – to be recognised as fully equal members of the West (cf. Barša 2014).

This is one of the main reasons why the East is not very capable of listening to the global South (Moore 2001). It is difficult for the inhabitants of Central Europe to develop empathy for the objects of Western colonialism, when their coloniser is perceived as a model, and its state the desired goal for which they are aiming (cf. Barša 2014). Identification with the objects of colonisation would mean admitting precisely the state that the educated elites have tried to overcome, and which they considered incompatible with the very essence of their “educated and cultured nation”. One of the key Czech frustrations, the absence of a sea coast, is undoubtedly connected with several cultural factors, but lack of participation in the building of colonial empires is one of them. When Hitler borrowed the word “protectorate” from the rhetoric of French colonialism in particular, in order to indicate that the Slavs were incapable of ruling themselves – and when he then launched an incomparably more brutal colonial policy in Poland and Ukraine – it was as if he were bringing to life the nightmare of Central European societies, in other words the sharing of the fate of colonialised countries.

Thus we come to the key difference compared to the classic colonial situation: the separation of political domination from civilisational superiority. While Western colonial domination in the classic colonial areas, or even Soviet domination in some parts of the USSR and in certain Eastern European countries, attempted to legitimise domination using arguments relating to economic modernisation and quasi-universalist civilisational advances, domination in Central Europe was not, by and large, considered to be the bearer of civilisational progress, which often came from other sources. We do not need to talk even about Hitler, in whose ambivalent relationship to archaism and modernity the archaic, “barbarian” side was emphasised. The Austrian and then Austro-Hungarian empires were often (although not always entirely justly) considered by Czech nationalists to be a hindrance to progress. The realists around Masaryk, for example, sometimes quoted Mazzini and labelled Austria the “European China” (see Herben in Havelka, 1995, 230–231), and the Czech lands self-identified as the most advanced and developed in the Habsburg monarchy. This was probably even more true of Soviet dominion, which, especially after the shock of occupation in 1968, was often described as an invasion of Central Europe by barbarians from the steppes (cf. Pištora’s popular poem) or as being similar to the domination of the more advanced Greek culture by the more bellicose and backward culture of the Soviet “Romans” (Škvorecký’s *The Miracle Game*, in which the weak hope

emanating from this parallel is that the more advanced but governed nations, whose advanced state is signalised by their attitude to Western culture – modern literature, jazz etc. – will, over the course of the next century, come to civilise their less cultivated governors). Above all in the Czech context, colonisation is not perceived as modernisation, but as a barrier to modernisation, or as demodernisation. Even the most common arguments for democracy among pro-democratic communist intellectuals (later eurocommunists), were orientalist: a Leninist dictatorship was suitable for the "backward" nations of the Soviet Union, but not for a developed and educated Central European nation with a democratic tradition.[6]

Czech Central Europe

It is this basic feeling that is reflected in the debate on Central Europe and in the most distinctive Czech contribution to that debate, Kundera's essay on the kidnapping of the West (1984). The following section will be devoted to a critical interpretation of it.

If in 1968 Milan Kundera was still defending a third way that was neither Western capitalism nor Eastern socialism (Kundera 1968), by 1984 he was formulating a concept of Central Europe that was interesting above all in that it did not represent any sort of "centre". Central Europe is simply a part of the West (in the sense of culture) that has been forcibly separated from the West as a political community. Its current situation, when it is indeed a centre, is the result of kidnapping and violation. If it differs from the West in something, it is that it represents Western values more thoroughly: historically, it is even an "arch-Europe" in which, compared with the imperial vastness of Russia, the principle of "as much variety in as little an area as possible" prevailed.

Kundera's relationship to the West can be labelled using a paradoxical term: *critical servility*. Not only the West, but actual love for the West was, in Kundera's eyes, key to the very existence and definition of Central Europe: "*If to live means to exist in the eyes of those we love, then Central Europe no longer exists,*" because the West does not register its existence (Kundera 1984). In addition to love, this figure reveals a total dependency: without the accepting gaze of the West, there can be no Central Europe. If Western Europe knows nothing of Central Europe, if it does not see it (as part of itself), then its existence becomes meaningless.

Kundera continues in a frequent figure traced by Central European and above all Czech intellectuals: for him, culture replaces politics. Even nations that do not belong politically to the West can claim their proper place as part of it, because according to them European unity is cultural. Kundera's criticism of the West consists of a search for the causes of misunderstanding between the West and Central Europe. Central Europe is for him a place where "culture" (connected with high art) has not yet been steamrolled over by "civilisation" (understood as overly large technocratic apparatuses and

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[6] The universalist reaction to this approach, however, as captured in the second quotation at the top of this article, was not overly typical.

mind-numbing entertainment) because the triumph of civilisation here takes the form of the violent invasion by the Soviets, while in the West essentially the same civilisation, coming predominantly from the US, is accepted voluntarily. Central Europe is thus more Western than the West itself, and is able to adopt superior stances in order to condemn the West. Out of the accepting gaze of the West as a precondition for Central Europe there grows a radical criticism of the West, which does not see Central Europe because it has lost itself.

Todorova has rightly pointed out that Kundera's definition of Central Europe is confusing, because his Central Europe has no borders (Todorova 2009, 140–160). Key to his definition is the Polish experience, but at the same time he defines Central Europe by means of the Habsburg heritage, which did not concern a decisive part of Poland at all. Of even greater concern to Todorova seems to have been the fact that in his concept Kundera implicitly divides Yugoslavia eight years before this division took place in real life.[7] Nevertheless, fundamental to this division was that Kundera's concept implicitly held it impossible for Europe to be enriched by non-Western impulses. Even the great Russian novels, while certainly great and representing cultural values, are above all very intensely *foreign.* Central Europe in Kundera's concept turns its back on the non-West, but its criticism of the West is immanent – it issues from full acceptance of the "original" Western values. Kundera thinks through some Western impulses, and above all confronts them with the experiences of "small nations", in Kundera's definition nations that might at any time disappear. To find themselves in the same situation as "small nations" thus defined, is, Kundera believes, the possible future fate of all European nations and, indeed, the whole of Europe. This is one reason why their experiences are of key importance to the West.

In reality, it is highly doubtful whether not only Poles but also Hungarians would be willing to think of themselves as "small nations", even in Kundera's definition. The intellectual doubts of H. G. Schauer (an intellectual of the second half of the 19th century, to whom Kundera returns) as to whether it would not have been better if the Czech nation had voluntarily disappeared and had taken on the more developed culture of a larger nation (evidently the German one), has nothing in common with the words of the Polish national anthem "Poland Is Not Yet Lost" and the combination of existential anxiety and combativeness that it expresses. Hungarian and Polish nationalism is much more imbued with the legacy of Catholicism and the aristocracy, is much more conservative, combative and explicit. It really does not express itself in its own denial (unlike Czech nationalism as characterised by Holý). For the Poles and the Hungarians, culture also does not supplement politics, or definitely not to the same degree as for the Czechs, in whose case *"culture and politics permeate each other. Culture is the politics of a small nation, culture proves its own existence and makes itself known."* (Kroutvor 1990, 54). As in the case of many of his other narratives surrounding Central Europe, in this case Kundera also used the label "Central Europe" as an

[7] In similar vein we may note, as Sušová-Salminen shows, that the fate of the expelled Germans has entirely disappeared from this Central Europe (Sušová-Salminen 2015).

amplifier for the experience of his own nation (and his own socio-cultural group within that).

Kundera's distinction between "culture" and "civilisation" differs from the way in which the Germans had seen this opposition in reaction to the civilisation that displayed itself as the symbolic violence of Enlightenment reason, and subsequently the violence of Napoleon's occupying armies (cf. Elias 1969). It has no relationship to the "people" – it is not accompanied by an idea of the people's deep wisdom. Kundera's "culture", which he uses to define Central Europe, is very French, defined by an admiration for the Enlightenment, the art of the novel and classical music. In Kundera's Central Europe, unlike in the West, however, this "culture" may be thought of as innocent, as the antithesis of soulless, mass, technological civilisation, which he believes is becoming predominant in both blocs of the Cold War (in the East being connected with forced Sovietisation, and in the West with gradual and voluntary Americanisation). In the West the same culture could hardly be thought of in the same way. The "culture" for which Kundera is nostalgic is in reality connected with the development of civilisation and modernisation, and it is hard to think of Enlightenment brilliance as disconnected from the rationalism that forms the basis of technical and industrial civilisation. If Central Europe needed the accepting gaze of the West as a condition for its existence, it was able to offer the West in exchange a view that disconnected its "culture" from its "civilisation", its role as an emancipator from its role as an oppressor. It offered it a view that suggested to it its own innocence.

Kundera is not a conservative – he is a former communist and a liberal atheist; he has very relaxed opinions regarding social ties and the relations between the sexes (although at the same time these contain male dominance and sexism). However, he, too, notices that in Central European revolts there is *"something conservative, almost anachronistic: they desperately try to renew the past, the past of culture"* (Kundera 1984). The sceptical and critical culture that produced an ironic distance from itself and was a source of universalism here becomes a source of particular identity, from which it is hard to imagine distance.

This approach of identification with the West and at the same time disdainful criticism of it for having ceased to be itself is, however, much more compatible with a conservative than a liberal approach. It was able to be a source of the behaviour of the "new Europe" in 2003, just as it is now a source of the acute reaction of the same Central Europe to the situation in Greece, and above all to the migration crisis. Central Europe sees itself as "more Western than the West", which it believes to be frivolous, not having had to test its values in confrontation with the enemy. Only in this negative definition can the various national experiences and identities merge.

Post-communism: a limited and donated trauma?

Is the post-communism of the Central European countries a postcolonial situation? If we return to Ewa Thompson's definition and go through it point by point, we have to state that:

1) *Poverty* as a relative value most definitely exists here (outflow of profits, low wages, the dependency of domestic institutions, NGOs, cultural and academic production on Western financing). This poverty is the result of an inferior and dependent position in the economic structure of the EU, and the sale of relatively qualified and relatively cheap labour (cf. Nölke - Vliegenthart 2009; Drahokoupil – Myant 2015; Švihlíková 2015). While this poverty is certainly not as drastic compared with that of the less fortunate countries in the post-communist area, it nevertheless contrasts considerably with the idea of being "normal European countries" that the Central European countries cultivate with regard to themselves. This situation of poverty is underlined in reality by European Union subsidies and structural funds that are meant to "even out" the conditions in the old and new EU member states, but which cause the relatively developed post-communist countries of Central Europe to rank among the greatest recipients of "development aid" – aid that at the same time has similar effects here to the effects that it has in the classic developing countries: ineffectiveness, embezzlement by elites, feelings of alienation, and the drawing of attention to the donor aid at moments of crisis in the relationship (cf. Tožička 2015).

2) The *pessimism* of the post-communist countries is not interchangeable with "African" pessimism, but is conditioned by the joyful expectations and eruptions of enthusiasm in 1989 and 2004 (with the first big wave of accession to the EU). It is a pessimism of unfulfilled hopes, not one of hopelessness – and this hope is not connected with a search for "one's own path" and one's own authenticity, but with the idea that the country's "return to Europe" will succeed, and that this Europe will mean the definitive solution of all the main problems, and will also mean belonging to the richer and more privileged part of humanity.

3) There are *"necessary fictions"* present. Sometimes they relate to the recent period of hope (an example is the current modelling of Václav Havel in the collective Czech memory). That these fictions are "necessary" can be seen in the fact that it is put forward even by critics of the postcolonial situation – for example Ewa Thompson, who in the foundations of her vision posits a return to Sarmatism, in other words the legacy of the aristocratic Polish republic.

4) *Culturalism* is heavily present, connected with a notion of the inheritance of "former habits". It appears notably as an explanation in debates on corruption and racism. It is exactly this debate on the inability to overcome one's own bad qualities and the "legacy of the past" that is squeezing out the debate on the structurally peripheral or semi-peripheral position of the post-communist countries within the EU. The shift from the analysis of power in society to an analysis of culture is the result of the post-communist shift from a political perspective to moral (self)criticism. According to Buden, it also reflects a shift from the possibility of change towards fatalism (cf. Buden 2009).

The post-communist situation has a number of postcolonial elements. That they are only very partially mastered and acknowledged means that

commentators in the media only infrequently reflect on the inferiority of the post-communist countries' economic position or the fact that the post-communist countries are among the greatest recipients of development aid in the world.

The Central European countries have donated their trauma from communism and Nazism conditionally to the West: the problem of the West in the spirit of the "lesson from Munich" and Yalta, as formulated by a number of Central European intellectuals, is not when it acts imperialistically, but when it does not act (cf. Slačálek 2010). The problem of the Central European countries was not colonisation by the West, but the fact that they were left to their fate, or to other colonisers. The main vector of self-definition in post-communist countries is not towards the West, but towards the East and the South – whether the European South in the form of Greece, or the global South in the form of Muslim migrants. The West is criticized for having stopped being the West (see Barša 2014). Under these circumstances, Central Europeans are able to put themselves in the role of those who see further and are more Western than the West, thanks to their experience of totalitarian regimes; they are able to warn the West against behaviour that they see as Munich-like appeasement. The content of this figure may, moreover, change considerably. During the first 15 years of post-communism, Havel connected the figure, using the universalist rhetoric of human rights protection and the expansion of democracy, to support for NATO expansion (which meant a particularist defence of Western "Central Europe" against Russian influence), the bombing of Yugoslavia and Bush's military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (see Slačálek 2009 and 2010, Barša 2015). In the past five years, however, it has been used in a primarily identitarist way, for the preservation of the Western character of Europe, allegedly threatened by Islamic immigration, or the preservation of its wealth, allegedly threatened by the southern European ineffectuality or depravity of the Greeks (see Buben 2015 for an alternative suggestion that southern Europe with its historical experience of dictatorships, transitions and integration into Western Europe in an inferior role is a suitable partner for comparison – and, let us add, for dialogue – with the Central European experience.).

Conclusion

Dear Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, you asked whether we were also postcolonial. It seems that you were looking to the post-communist countries for partners in experience, dialogue and solidarity. We are very sorry, but you will not find what you were looking for in Central Europe. Your question may cast light on some features of the post-socialist experience, but when we pose it rigorously we find barriers to the transfer of concepts at the analytical level, and in terms of the development of solidarity, on the level of political action. The basic barrier is that the fundamental anxiety of Central European countries is fear of being expelled from the West and put on to the same level as the colonised countries. At a point where, going against the pressure of universal civilisation, they are discovering their "authenticity" and distinct

nature, they are highly concerned that they should at the same time confirm their Westernness, that it should be more of a non-current version of Western thought: whether Kundera's nostalgia for French literary culture, or Thompson's nostalgia for "chivalry" and the Catholicism of the Polish aristocratic republic.

There is nothing "central" about Kundera's (and then Havel's) Central Europe. It is not a "bridge" between East and West. It represents a West that was merely "kidnapped" and so is all the more aware of its "Westernness". The second thing is that although it claims to be a summary of the experience of all of Central Europe, it models this Central Europe above all on the Czech experience with Austria-Hungary and Russia. Central Europe, too, thus serves the Czech identity above all as a tool for rapid escape to the West and the gaining of a maximally privileged position in the West. The myth of Central Europe is, as told by Czechs – by Kundera intellectually, by Klaus in the 1990s in actual fact – the story of *escape from Central Europe*. It is an escape from other post-communist countries, and also from any sort of experience that might be thought to be "Central", which might be open to non-Western impulses and might include reflection on the experience of passionate identification with the West, regardless of all the barriers, including the West's own lack of interest.

In these circumstances, it is worth using some concepts in postcolonial studies to the national identities of Central Europe (and their post-communist situation) above all as hypotheses and sources of questions. Their main productivity lies in the opening of the Central European experience to comparison and the counterbalancing of its Western-centric and euro-centric method of research. The aim of this opening up is to find connections, similarities and differences – but without sensitivity to these differences, a useful instrument may become an unhelpful grid. To fully subordinate Central Europe under the heading of postcolonial experience is not only to "abduct" Central Europe, but also to abduct postcolonial theory. This may then become not only a homogenising incantation that renders important differences invisible, but also a source of a type of political thought that makes use of postcolonial pathos to provide problematic legitimacy to Western identitarist projects. The question of whether postcolonial theory may have similar problems when applied elsewhere (only if we delete the word "Western" from the previous sentence) is one that goes beyond the scope of this article.

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