

Between the Historical Region and the Central Europe of Novelists and Philosophers

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Following Jóhann Páll Árnason's occasional distinction between the imaginative Central Europe of novelists and philosophers and the historical region of East-Central Europe, this article uses the example of this region to discuss the relationship between public debates (including essays and novels) about the past and professional historical discourse. It explains the irreducibility of the diverse polycentric perspectives of Central Europe and the risks of its originally Western-centric construction in the 19th century, as manifested in the present day.

Keywords: Árnason – Milan Kundera – Karel Kosík – Eastern Central Europe – historical region – historical polycentric perspectives – translatability of historical works

Introduction

Jóhann Páll Árnason defined the concept of “region” to establish the methodological foundations for his analyses of civilization. He elaborated on this notion in several texts, using Central or Eastern Central Europe as examples. He politely but consistently distanced himself from the conception of the “Central Europe of novelists, essayists, and philosophers,” considering it too imaginative (Arnason 2005; 2015) and – it could be added – analytically unusable. Rather than relying on this captivating concept of Central Europe that flourished during the 1980s, he favored a structurally historical approach to defining the region. In my work, however, I seek to present an approach that helps fill the distance between the two concepts. Therefore, based on the works of two representative authors, Milan Kundera and Karel Kosík, I will first demonstrate that “their imaginative conception” can be interpreted as a unique structural-historical definition of the

region, henceforth posited as the region of non-self-evident nations. Secondly, I will discuss the thesis of the irreducibility of polycentric perspectives in Central Europe. Thirdly, I will address the issue of translating these perspectives as a prerequisite to integrating the history of non-self-evident nations into world and global history.

I. Preliminary Note on the Terms “Central Europe” and “Eastern Central Europe”

A clear distinction between Central Europe and Eastern Central Europe was established by Oskar Halecki (1950). He divided Central Europe, a region traditionally and commonly defined by the Alps, the Rhine, the Baltic Sea and a wide belt of transition between Western and Eastern Christianity (cf. Hroch 2016), into Western (German) Central Europe and Eastern Central Europe (comprising predominantly Slavic nations). However, since at least the 1920s, a competing definition has been used, drawing upon the traditional kingdoms whose crowns were acquired by the Habsburgs in the 16th century (cf. Krofta 1929). The definitions of Central Europe associated with Habsburg nostalgia represent a separate branch of concept development.

Halecki’s distinction had completely dissolved by the 1980s, during which the region was defined by the Iron Curtain to the west and by the borders of the Soviet Union or the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the east. Thus, the concept of Central Europe often coincided with Masaryk’s zone of small European nations (barring Scandinavia) (Masaryk 1918, 15) and occasionally comprised Ukraine or a portion of it, some or all of the Balkan countries (except Greece) and the eastern Baltic countries.

At that time, Central Europe was a topic of discussion not only for essayists but also for professional historians, literary scholars, sociologists and political scientists. Their approaches sometimes diverged, often contradicted each other and were rarely synergistic. The fascinating history of this concept and the associated discussions will not be covered here; rather, I will focus on two aspects only: 1) the structurally and historically defined Eastern Central Europe¹ and 2) the Central Europe of novelists, essayists and philosophers, specifically the region of non-self-evident nations.

¹ For the sake of clarity, I draw on the works of historians Árnason uses in his texts, knowing that they represent only a fraction of the extensive historical research on Central Europe. For a discussion of the contributions and limitations of the structural-historical approach, see the distinguished reflection of Jan Horský (2018).

II.

Historical literature predominantly defines the region of Eastern Central Europe through a set of structural and historical similarities: a) Latin Christianization; b) an independent church organization, at least since the High Middle Ages; c) an early modern period characterized by strong estates, second serfdom and a weak bourgeoisie; and d) a loss of independence in the 17th and 18th centuries, which foreshadowed the specific characteristics of the formation of modern nations in the region (see Zernack 1977; Szűcs 2022). Jürgen Kocka occasionally made an important comment emphasizing the non-exclusivity of most of these characteristics and thus their unsuitability for a classical definition (Kocka 2000, 165).

As conceived by Milan Kundera and Karel Kosík, Central Europe encompasses a geographical area similar to that of Eastern Central Europe as delineated by historians, yet it also includes Austria. The authors characterize the region as comprising of “small” or “non-self-evident” nations. They are fully aware that this is not a characteristic exclusive to Central Europe.

According to Kundera, a small nation is distinguished from a large one not by population size, but by the fact that

for small nations, existence is not a self-evident certainty, but always a question, a wager, a risk...There are almost as many Poles as Spaniards. However, Spain is an old power whose existence has never been under threat, whereas history has taught the Poles what it means not to exist (Kundera 2007).

The two definitions of the region only coincide in the final characteristic: the formation of the modern nation.

Non-self-evident nations emerged east of the Rhine in the 18th and 19th centuries. Unlike Western European nations, they were *nations without a state*. “History is a game full of surprises and unpredictability,” describes Karel Kosík, “and no one can know in advance how many subjects will participate in these events” (Kosík 1993, 72) and how each modern nation will define itself. In the 19th century, Central Europe was a region of non-self-evident nations, none of which had their own nation-state.

As František Palacký articulated in 1848, none of the aforementioned nations was large enough to establish a nation-state capable of self-preservation without incorporating large groups of people from other nations (Palacký 1873, 256), except for one. The period between 1848 and 1871 witnessed the gradual emergence of the German nation-state. During this era, Germans, but not the nascent German-Austrian nation, vacated the region of non-self-evident nations.

However, as twentieth-century history shows, this abandonment proved to be very precarious. It was only with the emergence of the Second Empire that the definition considering “east of Germany” became significant, defining the western borders of Kosík’s and Kundera’s Central Europe, just as it does the western borders of Eastern Central Europe for most contemporary historians.

A stateless nation does not mean its people are without a state. The population initially resided in absolutist states, which, similar to France – the archetypal nation-state – effectively established a dominant position over religion, suppressed local powers, and enforced the unification of weights and measures, as well as the equality of subjects before the law. Later, despite temporary setbacks, such as the counterrevolutionary neo-absolutism that followed after 1848, they experienced the benefits and shortcomings of citizenship in a constitutional monarchy from the 1860s onward. The sole prerequisite for the unification of a modern state and nation was absent: a unified codified language, in which matters regarding administration, higher education and high culture were conducted, and in which the civil society of the nation-state communicated, was not considered an indisputable cultural achievement that would also be attractive to nationalities with a different mother tongue. Therefore, the state could not use bureaucracy to channel the pre-modern traditions and loyalties undermined by industrialization into a new national identity. Non-self-evident nations thus take on the important function of the modern nation. In a complex industrial society, they preserve the space of a normatively understood life-world and, originally rather unintentionally, also take over the creation of a national public sphere, which replaces the weak public sphere of state citizens. In doing so, they utilize whatever suits them from pre-modern identities and institutions according to their immediate needs.

A unique constellation emerges: on the one hand, there is the state, embodied by the emperor and his court, supported by a loyal, massive class of self-confident, efficient and educated bureaucracy, the officer corps of the army, and a stratum of German-speaking merchants, technical experts and lawyers spread throughout the empire. On the other hand, there is a national community of stateless nations with an increasingly complex higher culture (involving education, universities, theatre, poetry with its own national prosody, etc.). We can roughly outline a common infrastructural culture (from the material one, such as cuisine and forms of polite interaction, to a uniform administrative and legal culture), against which areas that characterize national culture, including national history, which will be discussed below, are distinguished.

Understandably, the non-self-evident nations of Central Europe only emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. In my opinion, this limited historical scope has a certain advantage over linking the region's characteristics directly to the long-term pre-modern genealogy of national identities (see Zernack 1996). This approach acknowledges the role of pre-modern identities in the formation of modern Central European nations from the outset, but the form and function of this role is not predetermined. In the 19th century, for instance, at least three concepts of the modern Czech nation emerged: the Czech-German bilingual nation, the Czechoslovak nation and the Czech-language nation. Each of these employed the same elements of pre-modern Czech identity but ascribed different significance to the language and heritage of the Czech state.

III.

It is not a matter of forcing Kosík and Kundera's reflections into the mould of the region's historical definition, i.e., reducing the inspirational tension between a "feuilleton" and a "specialist journal" (Kocka 2000). Conversely, it is notable that the perspective of a feuilleton (novel, philosophical essay, etc.) can, on occasion, be more objective and sober. From the perspective of historical research, it remains a matter of some scandal that, even when all principles of historical craftsmanship are observed, Central Europe is portrayed differently in historical works depending on whether they are written in Prague, Budapest, Berlin, Leipzig, Krakow or Warsaw. Meanwhile, Kundera and Kosík view the diversity of perspectives and the polycentric nature of Central Europe as essential characteristics of the region's non-self-evident nations.

Some differences in perspective tempt us to explain them entirely as relics of the 19th century, when Central European nations created their national histories for the legitimacy of their claims to recognition and dignity. In fact, we only become aware of this type of difference when it clearly contradicts the current state of historical knowledge. In this case, achieving mutual understanding, or even unifying perspectives, becomes a routine task in historical science. This is because unity in historical knowledge always exists only as the potential unification of the currently different positions of various research schools, which are sometimes defined nationally and sometimes not.

However, every Central European national society has "symbolic centers" (Havelka 2001), i.e., long-term active fields of conflicting interpretations that significantly shape identity and political programs within a given national culture or group of cultures (examples of such symbolic centers: Munich,

Slavism, the expulsion of Germans and Hungarians). One of the symbolic centers that underpin the irreducible diversity of perspectives on Central Europe is the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. Nevertheless, it may be more instructive to consider two less mutually conflicting national symbolic centers, namely the Hungarian gentry nation² and the Czech plebeian, and how these are subtly reflected in the historical definition of Eastern Central Europe.

According to István Bibó's impressive interpretation, "the general nobility (*közneemes*, that is, the lower and the middle nobility) that hardly differed from, yet disdained, the peasantry...and yet imbued with a spirit of domination and enjoying noble privileges" emerged as the dominant class of Hungarian society after the Battle of Mohács (Bibó 2015, 202). The gentry character of Hungarian society contributed to the fall of the 1848 Hungarian revolution and ultimately led to the catastrophes that Hungary experienced in the 20th century. Bibó's description of the historical lie about the assimilation of the Jewish and German bourgeoisie in Hungary presents one of the most penetrating ideas about the sources of anti-Semitism, not only in Hungary (Bibó 2015b). Jenő Szűcs translated Bibó's reflections into historical discourse and claimed their broader validity for East-Central Europe as a whole. This region is characterized by weak cities and a weak bourgeoisie, as well as a high proportion of mostly impoverished nobility (Szűcs 2022).

Discussions in Czech refer to a plebeian nation. Czech society had to be built from the bottom up, because, at the beginning of the 19th century, the upper classes in Bohemia – the nobility, the high bureaucracy, scholars and the bourgeoisie – used German as their cultural language. Although the Czech nation had developed a high national culture by the end of the 19th century and largely accepted the value of civil equality, it lacked the determination to assume responsibility for state governance. According to this account, the Czech failures of the 20th century were partly caused by the petty bourgeois character of the national society, for whom the happiest solution was laughter and escaping into "complete indifference to the great collective conflict" (Kundera 2014, 57).

Despite their differences, the Hungarian and Czech narratives share commonalities: both are based on the presumed risky nature of the national

² "Note the difference between the use of 'gentry' in the English context ('people of gentle birth and breeding, class immediately below the nobility') and the Hungarian one ('people with a noble background, but without property or social standing')." Comment by translator in Bibó (2015, 447).

character, and both consider the arrival of the Habsburgs and the crisis of the estate system as key moments. When translated into historical discourse, both narratives can be supported by a range of credible data and facts. At the same time, both narratives pragmatically set aside a range of other facts; the Czech narrative, for instance, leaves out the significant contributions of German-speaking Bohemian nobles, university professors, clergy and wealthy bourgeoisie, such as the Šternberks, the Thuns, J. Dobrovský, A. Smetana, etc., to the Czech national movement until at least the mid-nineteenth century.

That cannot be discussed in detail here due to several reasons. The Hungarian and Polish “nobility” perspective prevails in the structural-historical definition of Eastern Central Europe. At most, for the Czech lands (including Silesia), certain exceptions are acknowledged, including cities, early industrialization and the development into “the most bourgeois modern nation in Central and Eastern Europe” (Szűcs 2022, 287), brought about by post-White Mountain oppression. However, many more exceptions are needed to consider the perspectives of the Slovenes, Slovaks, Rusyns and other East-Central European nations that did not have medieval kingdoms.³

IV.

Isn't the emphasis on the legitimacy of national perspectives merely a remnant of methodological nationalism? It may be, but as I will demonstrate, it is also a promising way to overcome it.

Historical knowledge is doubly influenced by national culture. Emerging as a form of collective memory, it inhabits the public sphere, where political decisions are debated. In contrast with other forms of collective memory, such as tradition, myth and memory fixed by the continuity of property relations, as well as artistic narratives ranging from epics to historical novels and visual arts, historical knowledge's irreplaceability lies in its monopoly on creating true utterances, which are strictly based on sources and produced with the necessary *akribeia*, using methods and procedures recognized by a professional audience. While historical truths are fallible, like all scientific knowledge, historical research fulfils the conditions of public rational discourse (Rawlsian public reason), which distinguishes it from other forms of collective memory. The normative, and often counterfactual, role of historical knowledge in civil society

³ For South Slavic perspectives on Central Europe, see, for example, Zoranovič (1994) or Gingrich (1998).

is, among other things, to protect against a “too hot” past. It deconstructs historical myths (which Sombart defines as narratives that motivate action and unite large, often heterogeneous groups of people) and, with the aid of factual evidence and testable hypotheses, sheathes the inflamed symbolic centers.

Without a living connection to a specific national audience, the questions that historians ask to lose their vitality and sense of urgency. Historical works are always written for two audiences (Apel 1988): the broader national public and the professional audience of historians, who verify them and, in the best cases, share them with other national audiences.

Historians, therefore, have a duty to unite patriotism and cosmopolitanism in their works, that is, to overcome the nationalist fallacy: the belief of ethnic communities in the superiority of their traditions and language, which separates them from the rest of humanity (Kant AA XV, 560). Unlike ethnicity, the nation enables communication with people from all eras and corners of the world. This is achieved through national culture, which accepts, interprets and translates world literature, science and history. The national public sphere functions as a portal for mutual translations (Habermas 2019, 138). Nevertheless, the onus does not begin with translating the works of others, but with creating one’s own historical works that are translatable, i.e. open to the understanding of others.⁴

Such translations always face a double provincialism (cf. Kundera 2007). This is the provincialism of large European nations that could credibly assume that they were shaping the world and that their history was a decisive component of human progress. From this perspective, non-self-evident and non-European nations can be dismissed as “nations without a state and therefore without history” (cf. Hegel, 1870, § 549). However, even a small, non-self-evident

⁴ The requirement of translatability represents a particular application of Kantian principle of *thinking from the standpoint of the other* or of the principles of discursive ethics. The normative requirement of translatability can only be extended to a limited extent into derived norms, such as Voltairian principle that *nothing in history should be explained by a miracle or the design of Providence* or into the command *avoid assertions that another cannot accept without denying their own dignity*, e.g., assertions about the superiority of a particular race or nation. In the historian’s own work, however, it is more often a matter of consistent respect for the fact that nuances such as the Czech and Slovak distinction between “*vlastenectví*” and “*patriotism*” may be incomprehensible in most European languages, or that invoking a unique national trauma in the interpretation of a historical event will not be effective even a few dozen miles from where the historian is writing. This note is in response to a question from one of the reviewers of the article, to whom gratitude is extended for the interesting suggestion.

nation cannot do without its own history. As mentioned above, it is an essential component of its public life.

Secondly, there is the provincialism of small, non-self-evident nations, which either burden the future with utopian messianism – where current misery qualifies the non-self-evident nation for a future role as savior (e.g., Štúr, Mickiewicz and Smetana) – or fixate on their history of national trauma and commit themselves to mourning the past.

When the concept of a non-self-evident nation emerged in the Czech cultural milieu, i.e. at the end of the 1960s, there was no talk of translatability, but of universality. The nations of Central Europe were stranded on the periphery of the Soviet empire. The alternative was to adopt Western mental cartography, based on the time lag from the Atlantic to the East. This would again leave them in the same position on the periphery, requiring them to play perpetual catch-up with global centers. In response, Jan Patočka expanded and reimagined Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*. However, it is important to recognize, consider and pursue Czech (Slovak, Slovenian, Polish, Hungarian and other) possibilities. Artistic and scientific creation, or political activity, can only become universal if we recognize and accept this possibility. While the work or activity remains rooted in the national "here and now," its full realization frees it from the limitations of narrow national culture and the public sphere (Patočka 2006).

Patočka wrote this in spring 1968, a time full of expectation. Less than a year later, after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, Kosík wrote an essay in which he transformed recognition of national possibilities into desperate resistance (Kosík 1993). With the space for political action hopelessly suppressed by the normalization regime and military occupation, this form of non-political resistance sought to preserve culture as a source of belonging and an open portal to the world. However, it was precisely at this moment that openness to the world, i.e. universality, reached its limits. In the narrowed space of resistance, it withered into openness only towards the Atlantic West – more precisely, towards the former ideal of Western European civilization. Therefore, Kundera's *The Tragedy of Central Europe* is imbued with criticism of the current state of Western mass democracy (Kundera, 1984). At the same time, the conditions necessary for an interest in universal history were being lost, namely, the belief that Central European countries could actively participate in creating history rather than merely being passive objects of it. "We did not create history; we lived it. We do not identify with its supposed or actual meaning" (Kundera 1978, 37).

However, adopting a narrow perspective and rejecting history increases the risk that actors will interpret their Czech, Czechoslovak, or Central European situation as unique and therefore untranslatable. The Czech dissent of the 1980s came closest to this with metaphors of the convex mirror and the laboratory. According to the former metaphor, what was happening in Central Europe under Soviet rule was a reflection of Western civilization, in which the self-destructive potential of modern civilization was clearly visible, as in a convex mirror (cf. Havel 1991). Vladimír Jiránek's 1968 cartoon shows a blank map of Europe with the outline of Czechoslovakia marked on it, alongside a sign reading: *Rented for experiments*.⁵ The cartoon alludes to a long history. At the beginning of the 20th century, Masaryk wrote about a laboratory of nations (cf. Masaryk 2014), which, in 1914, in Karl Kraus' dictum, transformed into a place for experiments with the ends of the world. In the second half of the 20th century, it became "a place for conducting experiments on people, where citizens were reduced to disposable masses of human resources and cities to labor camps" (Kosík 1993, 87 f.).

Neither metaphor is entirely misleading; both allow us to focus on connections that would otherwise be barely perceptible. However, they carry a high risk of distorting this focus onto a desperately comforting notion of the privileged epistemic position this miserable situation grants us, thereby trapping us in a belief in our own exclusivity rather than providing an opportunity to transcend the limitations of our situation.

If we soften the requirement that perspectives inherently anchored in the national or regional "here and now" be transformed into universal works and actions and instead require systematic work on their mutual translatability, we can mitigate the risk of failure stemming from such exclusivity. While we cannot eliminate the national perspective entirely – and judging by the current Ukrainian struggle for their history and culture, this is probably not desirable – we can push its openness even beyond Patočka's concept of national possibility.

František Palacký once expressed the normative requirement for the translation and translatability of historical perspectives within the idea of good cosmopolitanism. Historians and scholars generally have a responsibility to communicate issues they have easier access to than people living elsewhere, owing to their linguistic background, proximity to archives and the tradition in which they were trained. Thus, the randomness of birth turns into responsibility, and such knowledge, which "gives good to one nation without

⁵ A 1968 cartoon by Vladimír Jiránek on the cover of *Reportér* magazine (No. 29).

taking it away from another,” is “a cosmopolitan institution in the noblest sense” (Palacký 1903, 321).

I will illustrate the contemporary relevance of the requirement for good cosmopolitanism, which Conrad (2016, 14) describes as the “transformation of universal ‘world history’ into global history,” using only an anecdotal example and avoiding analysis.

In a Prague café called “U zlatého hada” (At the Golden Snake), a group of young historians, possibly graduates from the department founded by J. P. Árnason,⁶ discussed the colonial guilt of Czech revivalists who drank coffee obtained through the exploitation of slave and colonial labor in the Caribbean. The historians know that the café, the oldest in Prague, was founded in the 18th century by an Armenian merchant from the Ottoman Empire. They also know that the Czech words “káva” (coffee) and “čaj” (tea)⁷ were borrowed from Turkish, as in most Central European languages. They might also remember that 150 years ago, guests at the café read a pamphlet about coffee by M. D. Rettigová, which regarded “American coffee” as the worst substitute when coffee from the Levant was unavailable (Rettigová 1845, 6). However, these uncomfortable facts hinder the adoption of ready-made templates from Atlantic centers, and addressing them would reduce the chances of obtaining citations and grants. Consequently, the profound impact of cultural interactions with the Ottoman civilization on Central Europe will be disregarded, as will the colonial patterns of relations between the local nations (for instance, the work of Czech officials, merchants, and experts in Galicia and Bosnia).

Conclusion

Despite the criticism it has received for its imaginativeness, the concept of a “Central Europe of novelists, essayists and philosophers” can be plausibly translated and understood as a characteristic of the historical region of Eastern Central Europe, as demonstrated in the interpretation of Kosík’s and Kundera’s works. The key concept underlying this translation is that of the “non-self-evident nation.” The relatively shallow historical depth of this way of characterizing the region, dating back only to the second half of the 18th century, may prove advantageous when examining how the individual nations of Central Europe reactivated and invented their pre-modern identities and

⁶ For more information on Árnason’s relationship with Prague in general, see Dunaj (2023).

⁷ For other cultural words borrowed from the Ottoman milieu into Central European languages, see Gringrich (1998).

national histories. Concurrently, it facilitates comprehension of the nationally anchored polycentric perspectives of Central Europe – and the irreducibility of these perspectives – not as mere vestiges of chauvinism, but as a conduit to surmounting methodological nationalism, leading to a global history that is not merely proclaimed but hard-won through the labor of historians.

In this context, the present study operates within the normative requirement of translatability (openness of translation) of statements derived from such irreducible perspectives as part of the minimum scientific ethics of a historian. In contrast to the more general requirement of comprehensibility for all others, the translatability of perspectives refers to the fact that a good translation – whether of fiction, philosophical or historical texts – is always a work, i.e., a demanding exercise in intercultural hermeneutics. This work can have a profound and lasting impact on the intended culture, sometimes exerting a greater influence than domestic artistic or historical works.

While I seek to revitalize some of its motifs, I also feel it is necessary to emphasize that the concept of Central Europe, which reached its zenith in the 1980s and found its classic expression in Kundera's *Tragedy of Central Europe*, is, however, inherently tied to its historical period and is at present extremely susceptible to ideologization. The belief that world history and European history are synonymous, which was shared throughout the Western world in the 19th century, collapsed elsewhere in the last third of the 20th century at the latest. Paradoxically, in the context of Central Europe under Soviet domination, it was preserved precisely by the effort to overcome the local situation and become universal. At least three types of risks arise from the ongoing confusion between Western and World History in Central Europe. Firstly, there is a tendency to escape into a global perspective and leave the issue of local rootedness to nationalists. Secondly, Central Europe's uniqueness is ideologized, mostly in connection with anti-communism. Thirdly, there is an inability to view Central Europe outside of the West-East axis and include the North-South axis.

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