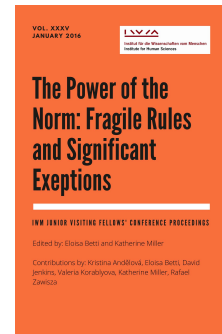


# Reinventing Central Europe and the Decline of Marxism Czech “Orientalism” through the Lens of Intellectual History

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*Abstract: In my paper I focus on the profound intellectual change that occurred during 1970s and 1980s when the belief that communism can be reformed gradually disappeared among the majority of intellectuals both in the East and in the West with the growing condemnation of Marxism as the ideology that gave birth to communist totalitarianism. Following Tony Judt analysis I argue that the decline of Marxism as a political theory since the 1970s and the increasing attention towards Central Europe are two interrelated processes, both among Eastern and Western leftist intellectual. Once they stopped identifying themselves with Marxist political theory and gave up Marxist political language, geopolitical arrangements were likewise reconsidered. Such geopolitical exceptionalism ultimately produced the new imagination of boundaries between former “socialist brothers” (those belonging to Central Europe and those outside). Thus, new ways of hierarchy appeared, sometimes bringing back a new (occasionally chauvinist) form of nationalism, which seemed to have, at the time, a special liberating potential against unifying Soviet claims. Such disillusionment led to a gradual de-legitimization of Marxism and communism and its externalization beyond Europe. This process ended, beside to other things, with a production of a hostile discourse towards Russia and Eastern Europe – a discourse which helped to shape a new Central European exclusivism: in comparison with the rest of the Eastern block, Central Europe was seen as an exceptional region with distinctive and more “Western” cultural qualities.*

All identities, including the geopolitical instances to be discussed in this paper, are based on a certain level of exclusivism and exceptionalism. Identities often create barriers and establish who we are and who we are not, defining that which lies within borders and that which does not. I will describe how the decline of Marxism – in both the East and the West – contributed to a formulation and (re)creation of a new, exclusivist Central

European identity within the late 1970s and 1980s. I will explain how the dissolution of Marxist political language and the renouncement of utopian beliefs led to a significant reconfiguration in the European geopolitical imagination. Once revolutionary ideas were discredited within Western (but also non-official Eastern) intellectual debates, there remained no legitimacy for the existence of a giant, seemingly united “Eastern bloc”. Both Eastern and Western intellectuals and writers started to insist more and more on the specificity of Central Europe in comparison to the rest of the Eastern bloc. The recognition that the Soviet Union was no champion of an emancipatory idea, but rather a safe house of imperial claims and empty ideology, gave rise to many new reflections that challenged the legitimacy of the bipolar geopolitical division, the so-called Yalta status quo. The renewed Central European identity was thus formulated, implicitly or explicitly, against the current geopolitical framework. The heart of this identity was the belief that Central Europe formed a culturally independent and unique entity, oppressed by an “alien communist regime”. Such geopolitical exceptionalism ultimately produced a newly imagined set of boundaries between former “socialist brothers” (those belonging to Central Europe and those outside), which has had fundamental consequences for post-communist geopolitics.

“Today, we are all Central Europeans,” stated Tony Judt in 1990 (Judt, 1990, 30). But rather than this being a pathetic confession consequent to the “annus mirabilis” of 1989, it was in fact an ironic reaction to the sudden enormous interest in the region. One year after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Judt reflected the significant change that occurred during the 1980s and culminated shortly after 1989, when the concept of Central Europe re-appeared in Western intellectual debates, providing a profound critique of Soviet communism. Since the early 1980s, many Western intellectuals, who for decades had ignored “Central Europe” as a distinct geographic, political and cultural entity, suddenly started to ascribe exceptional value to this region. But what had happened to precipitate this renewed interest?

Seven years after Judt’s article, Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans*, one of the most significant books dealing with the symbolic geography of Eastern Europe, was published (Todorova, 1997). Here, Todorova devotes a whole chapter to the use of the concept of Central Europe, within the intellectual and political debates of the 1980s and ’90s. (Todorova, 1997, 140 – 160). As a “first round” (initial debates) she analyzes the most famous texts concerning the idea of Central Europe that appeared during the 1980s, authored by three Eastern European writers and anti-regime thinkers, namely Jeno Szücs, Czesław Miłosz, and Milan Kundera. Todorova argues that during the 1980s, a new concept of Central Europe appeared across the region, which pointed to Central Europe as an independent cultural entity, differentiating itself from Soviet Russia and the rest of the Eastern Bloc.

All of these authors see the Russian influence as something that had more or less oppressed “Central European” culture and had had a destructive influence on the societies of the region. Although Todorova ascribes an emancipatory potential to all texts in terms of resisting Soviet dominance, she also argues that they implicitly or explicitly produce a certain level of racism towards the “East”, specifically to Russia. Todorova emphasizes

that this emancipatory idea of Central Europe was transformed into a 'politically expedient tool', that enabled the region to separate itself from the rest of the Eastern bloc. This further enabled Central European countries to elicit acceptance from Western European institutions, and thereby produce an "internal hierarchy" within the former Eastern bloc:

To summarize, the third round in the development of the Central European idea after 1990 witnessed its entry from the politics of culture into political praxis. Far from becoming a region-building notion, it was harnessed as an expedient argument in the drive for entry into the European institutional framework. It is during this stage that the Balkans first appeared as a dichotomical opponent, sometimes alongside with, sometimes indistinguishable from Russia. This internal hierarchization of Eastern Europe was born out of political expediency but in its rhetoric it feeds on the balkanist discourse. After all, it is not symbolic geography that creates politics, but rather the reverse. (Todorova, 1997, 159)

Probably the biggest "enfant terrible" for Todorova within the 1980s discussions, is the Czech writer Milan Kundera, in particular his 1984 essay 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' (Kundera, 1984). Kundera's pathological text provoked intense debates all along on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Kundera declares that, culturally, Central Europe used to belong to the Western civilization, but was kidnapped by the Soviet regime, which in turn destroyed its essentially Western heritage. According to Kundera's opinion, Central Europe refers to a common "culture and fate" rather than some clearly defined political community. But what he stressed most emphatically was the fact that Central Europe as an imaginary space belongs to *Western civilization*, which fundamentally differs from Russian civilization. However, Soviet dominance over the region is not, for Kundera, the biggest 'tragedy of Central Europe'. The real tragedy for this region is the fact that Western Europe has not noticed the disappearance of its cultural home, because "Europe no longer perceives its unity as a cultural unity"(Kundera, 1984, 36). This abdication of culture is Kundera's biggest concern; Europe no longer considers culture as a sphere where the highest values are realized (Kundera, 1984). Thus, the text sounds extremely melodramatic and, to paraphrase Czech writer Eva Kantůrková, rather than tending to reality, it instead reflects "Kundera's own sorrow and dissatisfaction"(Kantůrková, 1985, 19). In her text reacting to Kundera's essay, Todorova expresses disappointment over the lack of "logical consistency and moral integrity", and accuses Kundera of being "outright racist"(Todorova, 1997). Although she sees the emancipatory potential of the newly emerged Central European conception, she argues that these intellectual stances within post-1989 political debates produced orientalism towards Russia and the East.

It is generally known that the term orientalism comes from Edward Said's famous book of the same name, and is intended for a different historical situation (namely, a post-colonial one). Said's Orientalism is characterized by imperialist pretensions or a certain hegemony over the 'other' that does not allow this other to develop freely. However, and importantly, there is another side to this fascination. I am aware that the transfer of post-colonial concepts into the European situation might be tricky, but I believe it can offer us a new perspective on how to understand the formation of new geopolitical hierarchies that

emerged both during the 1980s and shortly after the fall of communism. “Central European orientalism” does not correspond in full to Said’s concept, primarily because Central European debates lack the overt paternalist features characteristic of colonial contexts. My use of orientalism echoes Milica Bakic-Hayden’s reformulation of the term for European conditions as *nesting orientalism*: a tendency of each European region to view the cultures and religions to its South and East as more primitive (Petrović, Fassmann. 2009, 141). What I address is the production of certain levels of hostility towards everything that was eastwards of Central Europe, and the classification of it as non-civilized, primitive and more conservative.

I do not aim to disprove Todorova’s thesis against Kundera. Instead, I would like to provide an alternative explanation of his text, approaching the concept of Central Europe from a more historical perspective. I do not think we can fully understand Kundera’s “outright racism” without first understanding the broad intellectual and political shifts that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s, both East and West, which are for the most part neglected by Todorova. As an intellectual historian I will not analyze and judge Kundera’s arguments in terms of whether they are right or wrong, but rather ask *what* he thought he was thinking and *why* he might have thought it.

Todorova argues ‘the Central Europe of the 1980s was by no means a new term but it was a new concept.’ (Todorova, 1997). My questions here are historical and thus go beyond this statement, seeking to ask the further question: What enabled ‘Central Europe’ to be thought of as a new independent entity with emancipatory potential? What are the intellectual roots of producing the specific “orientalism” against Russia? And what happened in the West as the concept of Central Europe started to be widely recognized within Western intellectual debates? Following these questions, I will show Kundera’s text as a characteristic example of the changing intellectual climate of the 1980s, both in the East and West. My argument is based on Tony Judt’s assumption that there is a close connection between the decline of Marxism and ‘re-inventing’ Central Europe in intellectual debates in the 1980s (Judt, 1990, 30). In this sense, I will read the problem transnationally, and argue that the decline of Marxism as a political theory among both Eastern and Western intellectuals since the 1970s, and the increasing attention towards Central Europe, are two interrelated processes.

In the following section I will reexamine Todorova’s reading of Kundera. Todorova reads Kundera’s text primarily through the lens of her own argument – regarding it according to its explicit production of a high level of hostility towards Russia and Eastern Europe in order to emancipate Central European culture from Soviet dominance. She does not pay much attention to his other motives in his text, some of which are crucial to a proper understanding. As I already mentioned, the motivation of her thesis is to show how the emancipatory idea of Central Europe in the 1980s degenerated into a form of Orientalism, respectively Balkanism, during the process of European institutional integration after 1989.

I agree with Todorova that there is undoubted hostility towards Soviet Russia in Kundera’s text. Although true, however, it is not original. Nevertheless, what is innovative about her text is that she connected these debates to an intellectual framework within

post-communist political discourse, which produced an Orientalist vision towards Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Kundera himself was criticized for being “racist” and “unjust towards Russia” immediately after the appearance of his text in 1984. One year later, in 1985, a special issue of the Czech exile journal *Svědectví* was published, which was devoted to Kundera’s already famous essay. His “elegy” was here strongly criticized (*Svědectví*, 1985). Almost all the authors pointed out a critique that can be summed up as follows: The tragedy of Central Europe was not caused by Stalin, but by Hitler. Kundera does not say a word about the destruction of Central European culture by Hitler and Nazism, without which, however, we cannot explain Stalin’s presence in the region. The tragedy of Central Europe started without Russian participation; Jews, who were crucial for the “Central European spirit” according to Kundera, were not liquidated by communists, but by Nazis. Furthermore, all the authors criticized Kundera’s racism and his distorted image of Russia being a brutal nation with innate tendencies to authoritarianism. The strongest critique came from the Czech historian Milan Hauner, who rejected Kundera’s pathos and inaccurate perception of history. In particular Hauner was outraged by Kundera’s statement that not even under Nazi occupation had the cultural potential of Czechoslovakia been liquidated to the extent that followed after the Soviet invasion in 1968 (Kundera, 1984, 37).

Although historical criticism is here completely legitimate, it does not help us understand the meaning of the text. Why does Kundera not devote any thought to Nazism in his “Tragedy of Central Europe? Why does Kundera, a former enthusiastic Stalinist and Czech patriot, suddenly perceive Nazism as less brutal than Soviet communism? And why does he “demonize” the Russians to such an extent?

There is an important historical factor that enabled Kundera to externalize ‘the evil’ without acknowledging any ‘self-guilt’ to Central Europe or the Czechoslovak intellectuals (including himself) who had a hand in the process of installing communism: Kundera was aware that the “communist evil” did not come prominently ‘from outside’, but his text is a political manifesto, not a historical analysis, and it must be understood in this way – as a plea addressed to Western intellectuals in order to provoke reflection on their own failure to prevent the disappearance of Central Europe.

Kundera belonged to the generation of Stalinist youth who recognized, painfully, their mistakes and who, as from the mid-1950s, started to attempt redemption of their Stalinists sins. The word *revisionism* in itself already suggests former mistakes and faults that needed to be revised. It was the idea of Marxist revisionism – the idea that communism can be reformed and Marxism can be revived and enriched with non-Marxist ideological inspirations – that gradually led to the Prague Spring emancipation. Thus, the intellectual roots of the Prague Spring found themselves articulated within a context of profound self-guilt, and represented an attempt to rectify former errors: communism was thus not yet seen as an external political factor, but rather as something installed by Czechs themselves.

Kundera, as accomplice to this historical development, was very much aware of this fact. In 1984, the year that saw publication of his *The Tragedy of the Central Europe*, Kundera also published his most famous novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Here Kundera

confesses:

Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes of Central Europe are exclusively the work of criminals is overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise. They defended that road so valiantly that they were forced to execute many people. Later it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers.

Then everyone took to shouting at the Communists: You're the ones responsible for our country's misfortunes (it had grown poor and desolate), for its loss of independence (it had fallen into the hands of the Russians), for its judicial murders!

And the accused responded: We didn't know! We were deceived! We were true believers! Deep in our hearts we are innocent!

In the end, the dispute narrowed down to a single question: Did they really not know or were they merely making believe? But (...) whether they knew or didn't know is not the main issue; the main issue is whether a man is innocent because he didn't know (Kundera, 1984, p. 64).

There is here a clear sensitivity to the problem of his own guilt and participation in crimes committed during the installation of communism in Czechoslovakia. Evidently, what Kundera problematized in his novel, was altogether ignored when it came to writing the essay. There are two important historical moments that gave him a framework within which to be so reductive in 'The Tragedy of Central Europe': political and cultural changes in Europe since the 1970s, and the still existing shock from the Soviet invasion in 1968. Although Kundera did not pay much attention to the Prague Spring itself, "the spirit of betrayal" is omnipresent in the text. The Soviet occupation which came entirely 'from outside' without substantial domestic participation enabled Kundera to convert the narrative of penance into the narrative of victimhood, and thereby criticize Western indifference. During the 1970s the majority of East-European oppositional intellectuals little by little left the idea of "reform communism" and thus stopped identifying themselves with Marxism. Once the hope of the reformation of domestic communism disappeared, the idea of communism as such was strategically externalized "eastwards" and thus rejected as a possible emancipatory idea for future development.

As already mentioned, Marxism lost its rhetoric power amongst Czechoslovak dissidents; it was the language of oppression, which could hold no future promise. Some of the Czechoslovak oppositional intellectuals, mainly former reform communists, though remained faithful to the possibility of reforming communist regimes and thus also to legitimize Marxism. But later on, even these people gradually gave up Marxism and rearticulated their visions in terms of a national idea of Masarykian social democracy. Although there were still Marxist believers, both in the East and in the West, the dominant intellectual discourse of liberation shifted away from Marxist humanism towards the language of human rights and, as Judt argues, towards the liberating concept of Central Europe.

Kundera wrote his essay precisely in the time when these new ideological frameworks were becoming mainstream among Western intellectuals. What was characteristic of developments after 1968 was the western Left gradually abandoning any ambition of transforming the world (with few exceptions such as Euro-communist movement). In the early 1970s it became increasingly apparent that “the revolutionary militants were failing to spark proletarian revolution” (Christofferson, 2015). At this point I would like to come back to Tony Judt’s assumption that there is a close connection between the decline and failing of Marxism and the ‘re-invention’ of Central Europe in the intellectual debates of the 1980s. In *Postwar* Judt expresses this huge intellectual change:

The failings of Marxism as a politics were one thing, which could always be excused under the category of misfortune or circumstance. But if Marxism were discredited as a Grand Narrative—if neither reason nor necessity were at work in History—then all Stalin’s crimes, all the lives lost and resources wasted in transforming societies under state direction, all the mistakes and failures of the twentieth century’s radical experiments in introducing Utopia by diktat, ceased to be ‘dialectically’ explicable as false moves along a true path. They became instead just what their critics had always said they were: loss, waste, failure and crime (Judt, 2005, 563).

As Judt says, paraphrasing André Gluckman’s critique of Marxism, ‘Broken eggs make good omelets. But you cannot build a better society on broken men’. Especially in France new epistemological trends influenced by postmodern paradigm started to insist more and more on the fact that there is no “Master Narrative governing the course of human actions, and thus no way to justify public policies or actions that cause real suffering today in the name of speculative benefits tomorrow”(Judt, 2005, 563).

Since 1968 several processes came together that caused a profound intellectual mistrust towards the Marxian vision of history, and thus also to the geopolitical status quo of Yalta. Alongside the liquidation of the Prague Spring, the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* in the West in 1973 caused the most important change to the perception of the Soviet Union. It caused something that Robert Horvath calls the “Solzhenitsyn effect”, a significant intellectual turn to anti-communism, and contributed to the final de-legitimization of the Soviet communism and thus also Marxism in the West;

What the West had to learn from these survivors of the classic post-revolutionary state was that Marxism—the exemplary revolutionary ideology— was an instrument of oppression, and was bound up with the existence of the Gulag. In particular, it was Marxism that nourished “the will not to see,” the habit of turning a blind eye to the proliferation of the “universe of the concentration camp.” Repudiating the Marxist condemnation of “egotistical rights,” Glucksmann concluded with a defense of “formal” individual rights as a reflection of aspirations of the oppressed (Horvath, 2007, 899).

The ‘Grand narrative’ of Marxist liberation disappeared and there was thus no justification for the current geopolitical status quo for leftist intellectuals, who started to see Marxism merely as a language used by the elite to justify the control and oppression of the people (Christofferson, 2015). Thus, after the collapse of the formerly strong belief in

Marxist liberation an empty space was created, within which new 'liberating' narratives appeared on the Left. Probably the most significant concept, expressing the new strategy of liberation of the people from the Eastern bloc, became the concept of human rights, which first appeared during the 1970s and culminated with the Helsinki conference in 1977 when the Czechoslovak Charter 77 went public. A human rights language, formulated simultaneously across the Iron Curtain, replaced the lost Marxist critique of the oppressed, and quickly became a new legitimating tool for intellectuals and politicians both East and West:

What remained of the revolutionary lyricism of 1968 was the impulse to defend the oppressed and the persecuted, which had been redirected (...) into a new, "humanitarian privilege": a new clamor for intervention, and even the use of violence, to stop the kinds of massacres that might once have been celebrated as hallmarks of revolutionary authenticity. In this way, one of the most important innovations of the post-Cold War human rights order was shaped by the challenge to the conscience of humanity that was issued by a survivor of Stalin's Gulag (Horvath, 2007, 907).

The concept of Central Europe never achieved such lasting popularity, primarily because it never provided any universal claims. But in the European context of the 1970s, when Western Europe became increasingly Americanized, the concept of Central Europe quickly became a part of renewed geopolitical discussion as it provided a new way of thinking about European identity as a whole. Judt argues that reemerging interest in Central Europe within intellectual debates was also closely linked to the reduced importance of the terms left and right in Western European parlance. What was called the "end" of the Left in France removed the sting from debates over Central Europe:

[W]hat we are seeing here is once again a projection of a Western radical vision onto an imaginary Central European landscape. Where once it was the fantasy of socialism, now it is the dream of "a united, independent Europe." If it cannot be achieved in the West because of the presence and interests of the United States, then let it be enacted further east, in some loosely defined Central Europe miraculously released from all historical and geographical constraints. (Judt, 1990, 39)

Indeed, the increasing influence of the United States and the 'superficial Americanization' of Western Europe was an important aspect of the times. As French historian Isabelle Davion argues for French intellectuals, the vision of a united Europe was a way for the region to distinguish itself from the United States (Davion, 2013, 30). Two new phenomena of the French Left intellectual scene – Anti-Americanism and also a new European form of anti-communism – were embedded in the movement of so called 'New philosophers' (*nouveaux philosophes*) denouncing Marxism as a form of totalitarianism. This dominant intellectual framework produced the rise of an anti-Soviet and anti-totalitarian "second left". Robert Brier argues that it was in France where the transnational politics of East-Central European dissidents had the most profound impact: 'The dissident's struggle seems to have served as a mirror image for the majority of French left-wing intellectuals who opposed the orthodoxy of PCF' (Brier, 2011, 212). Indeed, French interest was also aroused because the values that were in crisis in Western Europe seemed to undergoing renewal in Central Europe (Solidarnosc, Charta 77...).



Central Europe, as an ‘imaginary continent,’ became increasingly important as a part of the vision of a united Europe that would renew a European identity currently in crisis. Interestingly, it was also during the late 1980s that the ideal of the European Union as an inclusive project for the *whole* of Europe appeared as an independent zone between the Soviet Union and the United States (Harbutt, 2010).

## Conclusion

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The belief that communism could be reformed gradually disappeared in the 1970s with the growing condemnation of Marxism as an ideology that gave birth to communist totalitarianism. Once leftist intellectuals (from the both sides of Iron Curtain) stopped identifying themselves with Marxist political theory and gave up Marxist political language, geopolitical arrangements were likewise reconsidered. As Andre Walicki pointed out, the inevitable ideological demobilization, followed by an outright “de-ideologization”, played a significant role in the gradual disintegration and final dismantling of the Soviet system.

Such geopolitical exceptionalism ultimately produced the new imagination of boundaries between former “socialist brothers” (those who belonged to Central Europe and those cast outside). Thus, new ways of hierarchy appeared, sometimes bringing back a new (occasionally chauvinist) form of nationalism, which seemed to have, at the time, a special liberating potential set against unifying Soviet claims. Kundera’s intellectual stance was a characteristic example of the post-1968 identity crises of leftist intellectuals who lost their belief in the possible transformation of the world. Such disillusionment led to a gradual de-legitimization of Marxism and communism and its externalization beyond Europe. This process ended, with a production of a hostile discourse against Russia and Eastern Europe – a discourse which helped to shape a new Central European exclusivism: in comparison with the rest of the Eastern bloc, Central Europe was seen as an exceptional region with distinctive cultural qualities.

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