

Introduction

Demarcating East Central Europe

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Regional divisions have probably been more salient and their meaning more contested in Europe than in any other part of the world. The debate on this subject is complementary to the ongoing dispute on European exceptionalism, seen as a macro-regional or civilizational feature, and it is no more likely to be settled in definitive terms. Regional boundaries can only be drawn in approximate ways, allowing for borderline cases and overlapping spaces that can be of crucial importance. The criteria and the more detailed models of division depend on analytical as well as historical contexts; changes to geopolitical or geo-cultural settings may impose new frames of reference. To take an example of some significance for the field to be explored in this issue, Soviet domination from 1945 to 1989 provided an obvious rationale for the idea of Eastern Europe as a region, but the abrupt demise of the whole Communist power structure highlighted the limits to more extensive use of this construct. A very different situation has taken shape during the past 15 years. It is, at this stage, hard to predict how further progress of European integration will affect the pre-existing – often blurred and conflicting – patterns of regional division.

From Central to East Central Europe

A closer look at defining traits and problems of the region to be discussed here might begin with the broader context: the attempts to revive the idea of Central Europe during the last phase of Soviet domination. This notion has a long and chequered history that cannot be discussed here; when it reappeared in dissident writings and attracted international attention in the 1970s and 1980s, it came with very specific connotations.¹ The main emphasis was on a record of important and original contributions to modern culture, cut short by imperial and totalitarian rule. This cultural background was seen as evidence of a Western identity suppressed during the Cold War (the theme of a ‘kidnapped West’ was particularly prominent in the most famous – but not most insightful – contribution to the debate, Milan Kundera’s essay on the tragedy of Central Europe). Less interest was taken in the political history of the region, and there was no direct link to strategies of political resistance: the protagonists of the debate were responding to a situation where the obstacles to change seemed overwhelming,

and the very survival of an alternative culture was perceived as a realistic substitute for goals that had to be postponed for an indefinite period of time. In retrospect, the oppositional discourse on Central Europe was successful inasmuch as it helped to consolidate a sense of cultural distance from the Soviet Empire (it thus played a certain role in the complex internal de-legitimizing process that undermined Communist power much more effectively than its opponents realized at the time). But it had no significant impact on the political choices and orientations of post-Communist regimes.

Reassessments of the Habsburg Empire – in light of the catastrophic sequel to its downfall – played a prominent role in the debate on Central Europe, and in some cases, they translated into outright apologetics; at the same time, the German role in the historical vicissitudes of the region was given less than its due. This may be linked to older but lasting reactions against German visions of *Mitteleuropa*. In any case, the uneven treatment of the western part of the region, together with the fact that the Czech, Hungarian and Polish protagonists of the debate were obviously reflecting on the historical experiences of their respective countries, may be seen as a pointer to more specific contexts. In brief, this particular twist to the discourse on Central Europe was, first and foremost, a new phase in the self-reflection of a more narrowly defined region, East Central Europe – less familiar to the broader public, but now perhaps more frequently invoked by historians, even if they find it difficult to agree on its boundaries. The reference to the three above-mentioned countries suggests a first step towards demarcation, based on recent history: Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland constituted the most troubled region of the Soviet Empire, the frontier zone where tensions between an imposed model and indigenous conditions led to recurrent crises and gave rise to projects of transformation.² In these three countries, reformist Communism took a more concrete and practical shape than anywhere else; they also developed the most vigorous dissident cultures, at first inspired by critical versions of Marxism but later divided into post- and anti-Marxist currents. Most strikingly, they experienced abortive exits from Communism: Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Poland in 1980–81 (in the last case, there was no Soviet invasion, but the military regime established after the suppression of Solidarnosc in 1981 was only a shadow of the former party-state).

This record invites reflection on backgrounds and legacies. But attempts to define a regional core, more or less identical with the three modern states and the historical kingdoms which they claimed as their ancestors, run into difficulties. To begin with an obvious point, the destinies of the countries in question have always been affected by interaction with neighbouring states whose identities and trajectories were in turn linked to more distant regions. On the north-eastern side, the Lithuanian connection drew Poland into closer contact with the Russian territories during successive phases of their history. From the west, the Austrian-based Habsburg dynasty and – at a later stage – its Prussian rival intervened decisively in the history of their neighbours. In the southwest, the long-standing link between Hungary and Croatia was a bridge to the Mediterranean and Southern Slav worlds. Finally, Romania is a particularly intriguing case. The

Transylvanian input into its modern history links it to East Central Europe, even in the narrowest sense of the term, although other aspects – including the historical foundations of Romanian statehood – were closer to Southeastern Europe, defined as the sphere of Byzantine traditions, Ottoman domination and nineteenth-century nation-states with mutually contested borders.

These thoroughly blurred boundaries have often been seen as reasons to prefer a broader perspective. On that view, the ‘lands in between’, located in a zone alternately surrounded or conquered by stronger states with imperial ambitions (German, Russian and Ottoman), constitute a distinctive region, variously labelled as Eastern Europe (thus excluding Russia), or as Central and Eastern Europe. It is, for obvious reasons, still demarcated from neighbouring German states, but the division between East Central and Southeastern Europe disappears, and at least in some cases, ‘Far Eastern Europe’ – the borderlands between East Central Europe and Russia proper – is included.³ It seems likely that historians will continue to use both definitions, and the broad one makes more sense in some contexts than others. In this issue, it is represented by the first contribution by Berend. But the main emphasis will be on the more specific merits of the narrow definition, and on the historical-sociological questions which it allows us to pose. The following discussion centres on the main trends and landmarks that have – for more than a millennium – shaped the regional profile of an East Central European core, even if its boundaries have varied markedly from one historical phase to another.

Two historians from the region have done the most insightful and seminal work on its formation within a broader European context: Oscar Halecki, who began his career in inter-war Poland but wrote his best-known books in exile after the war, and Jenő Szűcs, whose work was obviously not unrelated to the Hungarian debate on Central Europe in the 1980s, but who reformulated the whole problematic from a long-term historical perspective that had otherwise been widely ignored. Their approaches share a highly significant historical starting point. The consolidation of the Carolingian Empire around 800 AD had completed a foundational synthesis of Roman and ‘barbarian’ legacies, and at the same time added new territories to the original domain of the Roman Empire, from which it claimed to be descended. The difference between old and new imperial domains is marked enough to be seen as a first distinction between Western and Central Europe. But then we have to draw another boundary further to the east: between the eastern part of the Carolingian Empire, later the core of its East Frankish/German successor state that revived the imperial claim in 962, and the adjacent zone to its east, where the institutional and ideological patterns of Western Christendom were – from the ninth century onwards – diffused without imperial conquest. East Central Europe is the most appropriate label for the region that thus began to take shape within the civilizational orbit but beyond the imperial borders of the emerging West. In the historical context (and to some extent in line with medieval usage), the term ‘Eastern Europe’ could be reserved for a more distant periphery: during the following phase, especially in the first half of the eleventh century, Kiev Rus – this name seems preferable to any version

of 'Russia' – entered into closer contact with Western Christendom. Even the Byzantine heartland is, at this stage, best described as another Europe in the making, whose development was later derailed by invasions from east and west.

Halecki interpreted the 'inner dualism of Central Europe' in explicitly ethno-national terms. After defining Central Europe as the realm of Western Christendom beyond the former Roman borders, he went on to distinguish a western part, 'ethnically and historically identical with Germany proper', from an eastern one, East Central Europe, which had, in spite of intermittent German control, 'always remained non-German, inhabited by a great variety of ethnic and linguistic groups in contradistinction to the homogeneously German West Central Europe'. On this view, the link between the two parts was 'not any real community, but rather an age-long struggle against a unification enforced by the smaller, but more homogeneous and therefore stronger part' (Halecki, 1962: 127, 129–30). Central Europe thus appears a permanent battlefield – an intra-civilizational rather than an inter-civilizational one – but the intensity of the conflict could sometimes blur this distinction; as Halecki noted, it was not always obvious that the two parts had more in common with each other than with Western and Eastern Europe.⁴ By contrast, Szücs (1990), writing 30 years later and in a very different context, emphasized divergent institutional patterns and paths of state formation, as well as the impact of more global processes. In particular, he argued that the simultaneous dynamics of Western European expansion across the Atlantic and Russian expansion across Eurasia had marginalized East Central Europe, and that the impact of this geopolitical as well as geo-economic shift was aggravated by the growing power of the nobility – at the expense of towns and peasants – within the region. The 're-feudalization' of East Central Europe was reflected in the character of its absolutism, in some ways closer to Russia than to the West. From this perspective, the dividing line between Germany and East Central Europe is much less marked.

Medieval Foundations

Following both Halecki and Szücs, the emergence of East Central Europe can be traced back to the medieval transformation that some historians now describe as 'the Europeanization of Europe' and others as 'Europe's discovery of its own diversity' (Borgolte, 2002). The crucial juncture is the ninth-century division of the Carolingian empire, accompanied by the diffusion of civilizational models eastward beyond imperial borders. In the regional context, these changes coincided with a key episode that went unnoticed in the two above-mentioned accounts. The short-lived ninth-century Moravian state ('Great Moravian Empire' would seem an inappropriate label) exemplifies the inter-civilizational background to early East Central European history. It took shape in the aftermath of a counter-offensive against Inner Eurasian rulers of the region (Charlemagne's destruction of the Avar state), and was in turn destroyed by a new wave of conquest from that quarter (the Magyar invasion). During the interval,

it became a contested domain between Western and Eastern Christendom. This was not a clear-cut case of civilizational conflict. Rather, the course of events was shaped by a complex set of intertwined factors. Differences between the two Christian centres, Rome and Constantinople, were at this stage more institutional than doctrinal (the Eastern Church was more willing to accept the vernacularization of scripture and liturgy, but this was not an absolute contrast), and they combined with rivalries of other actors in the field: the Eastern Carolingian state had its own strategic interests, those of its episcopate were sometimes closer to it than to Rome, and dissent within the ruling Moravian dynasty affected geopolitical choices (for a succinct summary, see Krejčí, 1990: 1–8). The upshot of these multiple conflicts was, however, a historical decision with long-term civilizational implications: the alignment of a new region with Western Christendom. Finally, there is a further – more conjectural – reason for stressing the importance of ninth-century origins. The evidence is fragmentary and inconclusive, but it seems likely that the Moravian state functioned as a transmitter of Carolingian models to the later Slavic kingdoms that left more lasting marks on regional history (Třeštík, 2001).

The Moravian episode was cut short by the Magyar invasion of the Danube plain – not the last wave of invaders from Inner Eurasia, but the last one to give rise to a new state in the region, and the only one to be assimilated into the expanding ecumene of Latin Christendom. The Hungarian kingdom retained some traces of its pre-Christian background, and this may have helped to maintain a notably multicultural character in the new civilizational environment (Berend, 2001). But more importantly, this integrative transformation was part and parcel of a broader realignment; the tenth-century transfer of imperial claims to the East Frankish kingdom – which thus came to be known as the Holy Roman Empire – coincided with the crystallization of three new centres of state formation beyond its eastern borders. These emerging kingdoms – Poland, Bohemia and Hungary – became, at the dawn of the second millennium, the defining components of East Central Europe as a distinctive region. Their separate identities became increasingly clear, but this did not prevent attempts at dynastic unification across their boundaries (the most successful project of that kind was the late medieval expansion of the Polish-Lithuanian Jagellonian dynasty). At the same time, they became the main geopolitical and geo-cultural frameworks for the transfer of institutions and ideas from the more advanced regions of Western Christendom. This entailed particularly close contact with Germany, and in all three cases (although in varying degrees) the strong impact of German immigration. In contrast to the neighbouring Baltic region, the influx of German settlers was largely peaceful and actively supported by the indigenous states, but there was some overlap between the two regional patterns, most momentously in the conflict between the Polish kingdom and the German Order.

Halecki interpreted this constellation in overly ethnic terms. It would, however, be unfair to dismiss his view as a total anachronism. The three kingdoms were multi-ethnic states with expansionist ambitions that sometimes bordered on the imperial level. But it is equally true that they were most closely linked to

ethnic cores, consolidated through the experience of statehood and the identification with long-lasting dynasties (the Piasts and later the Jagellonians in Poland, the Přemyslids in Bohemia, and the Arpads in Hungary). In this sense, the kingdoms and their later destinies were central to the long-term processes of nation formation in the region. Western analysts of nationalism, prone to invidious distinctions between West and East, have mostly failed to grasp the complexity of this specific situation (for a forceful reminder, see Zernack, 1994).

Some historians would object to parallels between the three kingdoms and argue that Bohemia was part of the Holy Roman Empire, whereas Poland and Hungary never acknowledged their sovereignty in more than the loose terms that could in theory apply to any European kingdom. This is a selective and formalistic approach. Although definitive recognition of Bohemia as a kingdom came later than in the two other cases (in 1212), the lord–vassal relationship between the emperor and the Bohemian rulers – subject to attempts at readjustment on both sides – did not entail any imperial authority over internal affairs of the Bohemian polity. To quote the best German interpreter of Czech history, ‘Bohemia is not an imperial territory’ (Seibt, 1983: 11). It was, in comparison with the two other kingdoms, both more intimately involved in and sometimes central to imperial politics, and the close contact could at times lead to explosive conflicts. The landmarks of this historical entanglement include the late thirteenth-century bid for hegemony within the empire by one of the last Přemyslids, as well as the fourteenth-century ascendancy of an international dynasty (the Luxemburgs) that made Bohemia the main basis of imperial authority and presided over one of the most significant phases of cultural upgrading in the region. But the most salient episode was the extraordinary Hussite movement of the early fifteenth century, which contested both the imperial and the ecclesiastical centres of Western Christendom and can – even if historians continue to dispute its meaning – be seen as a forerunner of later upheavals in the West, beginning with the Reformation.

Modern Transformations

The after-effects of the Hussite explosion were contained within a re-stabilized Bohemian kingdom, and on the eve of early modern transformations, the region seemed to be drawing closer to dynastic integration than ever before. On the cultural level, this was perhaps – not least due to the influence of Renaissance humanism – the moment when some regional centres came closest to being on equal footing with the West. But trans-regional history soon took a different turn. As noted above, Szücs’s reflections on this major watershed stressed the impact of external factors: massive changes in the global balance of power, due to Western and Russian expansion, as well as the direct and destructive effects of Ottoman expansion from the south. Szücs linked this view to the more distinctively Marxist conception of a ‘second serfdom’, established by the ascendant nobility in response to the formation of a world market, with new outlets for agricultural

products. This latter explanation for regional backwardness is now less favoured by historians. The development of economic structures was less uniform and some of the changes in question occurred earlier than the model would have it. But there is no doubt about the importance of imperial expansion, outside and inside the region. The genesis of the Habsburg Empire, which was to dominate the regional scene until World War I, was directly related to the Ottoman threat. The Habsburg realm first emerged under the aegis of a regional branch of the dynasty which tried and failed to link the Holy Roman Empire to the Spanish spearhead of Western expansion; it is difficult to determine when a composite state crossed the imperial threshold, but when the imperial title was added to rule over Bohemia and a part of the fragmented Hungarian kingdom, a new geopolitical configuration had obviously taken shape.

The victory of imperial power over the historical states – as the three kingdoms are often called – shaped the course of modern history in the region. But counter-currents also left their mark on cultural memory and on political traditions that could be reactivated at later stages. During the late medieval and early modern periods, a political order based on estates and their assemblies reached an exceptionally high level of development. This phase represents a very distinctive episode in the history of European state formation. As one German historian puts it, the three East Central European countries came closest to creating a ‘pure form of the estate order’ (*Reinkultur von Ständestaatlichkeit*) that had first emerged as a European phenomenon in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Schramm, 1996: 18, 23). In the end, imperial monarchy prevailed over the estate order; the paths leading to that outcome differed from country to country, but were always crucial to collective memories and self-images. The Polish estates, dominated by the upper nobility, succeeded in blocking the development of absolutist monarchy, but at the price of weakening their own state, exposing it to destruction by neighbouring ones and providing the Russian Empire with a foothold in the region. The swiftly defeated revolt of the Bohemian and Moravian estates against the Habsburg push for absolute rule sparked a European conflagration (the Thirty Years’ War); it was followed by a political and ideological counter-offensive that changed the course of Czech history. The Hungarian version of the estate order survived in remarkably vigorous shape in the Transylvanian remnant of the kingdom, and proved strong enough to maintain some defensive positions after the establishment of Habsburg rule over the whole country. To complete this overview, it should be noted that the experience of the *Ständestaat* also gave rise to tenacious political myths. The prime example is perhaps the image of the Polish ‘republic of the nobility’ as a pre-figuration of purely political nationhood (for an effective demolition of this, see Althoen, 2003).

The Habsburg Empire turned the tables on the Ottomans at the end of the seventeenth century and went on to project its power – direct and indirect – into South-eastern Europe. Compared with this dominant force, the East Central European presence of the Russian Empire was more marginal. The Habsburg background is central to all discussions about the identity and internal diversity of the region. Imperial integration lent some substance to the idea of a larger

Central Europe, but at the same time, the internal dynamics of power structure, cultural traditions and economic changes reshaped the East Central European constellation. The interpretation of absolute monarchy as a last-ditch defence of 'feudal society' is always misleading, but particularly so in this case. The Habsburg version of absolutism had a transformative dynamic of its own, expressed in changing political strategies as well as in readjustments of relations to social and national forces. Epoch-making reformist measures were taken in the second half of the eighteenth century; later rulers did not continue in the same vein, but the capacity for autonomous action was still reflected in responses to changing situations during the nineteenth century, especially after the abortive revolutions of 1848. There are no compelling grounds to assume that this adaptive potential had been exhausted when the imperial leadership opted for a war which it was bound to lose in one way or another. Similarly, economic modernization within the empire, however uneven and conducive to new tensions, was nowhere near a dead end or a definitive blockage in 1914. It had led to increased differentiation between centres and peripheries (industrial growth in Bohemia and Moravia was particularly important for the overall configuration), and this superimposed a general European pattern of unequal development on the regional context; but the specific forms and consequences of this dynamic were still marked by regional factors, and although the empire cannot be credited with a developmental strategy, its manoeuvring ability was certainly not negligible. However, the other side of the picture should not be forgotten: the adaptive strategies of the empire were geared to further involvement in the competition between the European great powers, and this made it particularly vulnerable to international crises. It was the core group of the Habsburg power elite that set the ball rolling in the summer of 1914, and its main motive was to neutralize the impact of the Southeast European conflict zone on the East Central European heartland of the empire.

Among the internal problems of the empire, the national question stood out as the least manageable when external setbacks became critical. Within the Habsburg realm, imperial and national dynamics interacted and clashed in more complicated ways than anywhere else in Europe. The most seminal twentieth-century analyses of nations and nationalisms related directly to this constellation; the authors included participant observers as well as exiles from the region (Otto Bauer, Hans Kohn, Carl Deutsch and Ernest Gellner are the best-known names). But if these works derived some essential insights from direct contact with the East Central European experience, they can also be criticized for not doing justice to the long-term processes of nation formation, and to the role of the historical states in that context. What they did reflect, even through the prism of oversimplifying theories, was the ambiguous relationship between imperial and national aspects of modern transformations in the region. Imperial power was perceived as an obstacle to full national development and self-determination, but at the same time, imperial modernization opened up new possibilities for the social and cultural consolidation of national identities, including those that had to be built from below without support from traditional elites. Tensions between

the two poles were aggravated by more specific factors. An institutional compromise with the strongest and most strategically placed group – the Hungarians – became both a model for and an obstacle to similar demands by others. And although the Austrian part of the dual monarchy (as it was known after 1867) could never be defined as a German state, the growth of Pan-Germanism among its German subjects and the increasingly dependent relationship with a resurgent Germany in the last decades before 1914 caused it to be widely perceived as such.

No discussion of modernizing processes in East Central Europe under Habsburg rule can omit the achievements and destinies of the Jewish community. The Jewish presence in the region goes back to the medieval period (it was part and parcel of the early ‘multiculturalism’ of the Hungarian kingdom, and a major wave of immigration to Poland in the late Middle Ages changed the geographical distribution of European Jewry). From a long-term perspective, East Central Europe appears – after the medieval Iberian experience – as the other major zone of European interaction with the Jewish civilizational diaspora. In the advanced modern phase, Jewish contributions to intellectual and cultural life – and to some political movements, especially the socialist one – were of first-order importance; the Zionist movement found its most important mass basis on the eastern margin of the region, in the formerly Polish part of the Russian Empire. At the same time, political anti-Semitism grew, but the regime that channelled it into the most destructive assault on European Jewry was not indigenous to the region.

The East Central European successor states of the inter-war period (including Poland, which combined the former Habsburg territory of Galicia with other parts recovered from German and Russian domination) have been somewhat unfairly condemned by later generations. They have, in particular, been accused of imposing spurious national identities on multinational populations and thus perpetuating the problems which they had pretended to solve. In this regard as in others, the historical record varies greatly from country to country. The most interesting case is discussed in one of the contributions to this issue. But in more general terms, a balanced assessment should begin by acknowledging that objective difficulties were formidable. Cumulative historical developments had made the relationship between state formation and nation formation – both integral components of the socio-cultural dynamic that shaped the modern world – more complicated and conflict-ridden than it mostly was in the West. Moreover, the multiple crises of Western modernity hit this region harder than others. The general post-war failure to move towards a more stable international economic and political order was compounded by the weakness of institutions built on the ruins of an old order. The global economic crisis that began at the end of the 1920s had a very destructive impact on East Central European economies. Last but not least, the two main totalitarian challenges to Western modernity – both of them rooted in the world war and its aftermath – affected the region in specific and massive ways.

This last point merits further comment. Indigenous totalitarian movements emerged in East Central Europe and its borderlands (the Fascist movements in Hungary and Romania were perhaps the most vigorous among those that failed

to gain power), but the main onslaughts came from outside. Nazi domination of East Central Europe was the first step towards a larger war of conquest, and although short-term tactics were different in each of the three core countries, the results of this brief and destructive interlude differed only in degree. Within the regional context, the racial imperialism of the Nazi regime did not translate into any coherent political project. By contrast, Soviet domination lasted for almost half a century and entailed social change of the most massive kind. The level of domestic support for Communist takeovers varied greatly: it was, in particular, much greater in Czechoslovakia than in Hungary and Poland. In retrospect, basic similarities are nevertheless obvious. The imposed regimes suffered from a fundamental lack of legitimacy, more acute in some situations than others, and their projects were undermined by internal contradictions as well as by basic incompatibility with regional conditions. As noted above, the three countries constituted the most troubled zone of the Soviet Empire. In 1989, the Soviet decision to abstain from further intervention led to the swift and total collapse of their respective party-states.

Contemporary Perspectives

The above summary of successive historical experiences should help to demarcate East Central Europe as a distinctive area – a *Geschichtsregion*, to use the term favoured by German scholars (see, in particular, Troebst, 2003). Its contours have been shaped by internal factors and trends at work within the larger European arena, as well as by more global dynamics. There is no doubt that the last decade and a half represents a new turning-point. The disintegration of the Soviet Empire seemed to open the way for more autonomous development, but other aspects of the situation have made that perspective less realistic. The wholesale de-legitimation of socialist ideas left the region open to a wave of utopian capitalism and to ideological dependence on a half-imaginary West. Global economic forces set strict limits on the strategies and initiatives of the regional actors in general and the governments in particular. Finally, integration into the European Union is widely seen as the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the region, although it is too early for clear-cut results to be visible, and prognoses of rapid ‘re-Europeanization’ seem implausible.

The second part of this issue deals with post-Communist developments and prospects in the region. But the first three articles discuss broader backgrounds to contemporary perspectives, as well as some key aspects of the recent past. Ivan Berend argues for a broader geo-historical framework and uses the term ‘Central and Eastern Europe’ to refer to the larger region mentioned at the beginning. In his view, this perspective is particularly useful when dealing with the advanced phase of European modernity, from the late eighteenth century onwards. After a long history of uneven development, industrial and democratic transformations in the West gave that part of the continent a more definitive and visible advantage over Central and Eastern Europe. Attempts to catch up, conflicts between

ideological and political projects geared to that goal, and national rivalries exacerbated by the problems and perceptions of backwardness have marked the history of the region for the past two centuries. In this context, ideas imported from the West have combined with intra-regional currents and often taken directions markedly different from those more familiar in their original settings. Berend's retrospective analysis of this whole period portrays it as a case of 'derailed history', a succession of failed strategies that often have aggravated the problems they set out to overcome.

With Arpad Szakolczai's article, the discussion returns to the more narrowly defined East Central European scene. The particularly prominent role of intellectuals in this region has often been noted. Their embrace of Communist ideology and politics is part of that story, but so are the dissident cultures of the late Communist phase. The region has also produced some of the most sustained critical reflections on intellectuals in modern politics and society – from the Polish anarchist Jan Waclaw Machajski, who first identified intellectuals as candidates for a ruling-class role under socialism, to the recent work of Ivan Szelenyi and his associates on the intellectuals as architects of post-Communist capitalism. Szakolczai approaches this problematic from an unconventional angle. As he sees it, the particularly troubling record of East Central European variations on Enlightenment themes has inspired a rediscovery of transcendence that may yet turn out to be the region's most distinctive contribution to twentieth-century European intellectual history. This radical reorientation is inseparable from a new understanding of the relationship between the ancients and the moderns.

The inter-war states of East Central Europe can be seen – and saw themselves – as successors to the historical kingdoms that preceded Habsburg rule. The Czechoslovak state founded in 1918 was, however, a more composite formation than the others, and proved more fragile – it was the only one that did not survive the exit from Communism at the end of the twentieth century. Johann Arnason discusses the Czechoslovak trajectory, with particular reference to its successive patterns of modernity. This case exemplifies a whole range of problems central to the history of the short twentieth century. Due to the dynamics of international conflicts and imperial rivalry, a successful national movement found itself in possession of a state which in many ways reproduced the problems of the defeated empire. These problems reappeared in different guises at successive historical junctures. The Czechoslovak experience is especially instructive with regard to the problematic of organized modernity and its internal differentiation. This applies not only to the contest between Western and Communist versions, but also to conflicts within the latter.

The last three articles deal with post-Communist developments. In this field, the 'transitological' models popular in the early 1990s are now discredited, and post-Communism has become a highly contested intellectual terrain. At the same time, the real transformations, often unfolding in unexpected and ambiguous ways, have highlighted both the diversity of background conditions and the contingencies of history. If there is a post-transitological consensus on anything,

it is on the need for attention to the specifics of each case and for caution in generalizing about a region, let alone about the whole post-Communist world. The approaches taken by the three authors reflect this state of the field. Henryk Domański's analysis of the Polish transformation stresses its inconclusive character and the apparent discrepancies between structural indicators and popular attitudes. A closer analysis of changes to social stratification goes some way towards clarifying the situation, but Domański nevertheless cautions against sweeping conclusions about the state and prospects of Polish society. One lesson to be drawn from the Polish experience is that acceptance – not necessarily enthusiastic – of economic transformations along capitalist lines is not very directly linked to the legitimation of the political system.

Jan Keller's article on the Czech Republic draws more emphatic conclusions. Here a more ambitious neo-liberal project – a kind of 'great leap westward' – has more manifestly failed, with far-reaching consequences at the social and political levels. A radical restructuring of society has taken place, but it has not created the ownership-based civil society promised by the architects of the new order. The growth of economic inequality, political apathy and social fragmentation has resulted in a constellation unlikely to favour constructive responses to European integration, and no new political project of any kind seems likely to emerge in the near future. It would be interesting to compare this situation with the other Czechoslovak successor state, where a neo-liberal leadership now seems intent on becoming a regional model for a second round of such policies. But it was not feasible to include an article on Slovakia.

Hungary played a pioneering role in the 1989 transformation of Eastern Europe: it was the first country where the Communist Party relinquished its monopoly of power. This was followed by a smooth transfer of power, a rapid stabilization of a party system, and a more regular pattern of alternating governments than elsewhere in the region. Against this background, the exceptional polarization of Hungarian politics in recent years came as a surprise to most observers, and is widely seen as a symptom of dissonances between the political system and the political culture. This makes the Hungarian experience particularly relevant to the ongoing debate on post-Communist democracy and its specific problems. Elemér Hankiss in his article argues that this issue raises a much more complex set of questions than the transitological models could admit. As a way of underlining these ramifications, he proposes the metaphor of a puzzle whose pieces do not always fit together in the same way, nor necessarily make a complete pattern. From this point of view, Hungarian democracy has some notable achievements to its credit, but some enduring weaknesses have also been evident, and new obstacles to consolidation are emerging.

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Paul Blokker's discussion of postcommunist modernization goes beyond the boundaries of East Central Europe. But the empirical and theoretical scholarship that he reviews and criticizes is more directly linked to the core countries of this region than to any others, not least because of their close relations with – and now formal membership in – the European Union. Blokker reconstructs the main moves beyond the early 'transitological' approaches, and then argues for closer critical examination of the basic assumptions behind transitology, more specifically its roots in modernization theory. As he sees it, the main task is to bring more past, present and likely future diversity into the picture, without losing sight of overarching theoretical issues. The increasingly visible diversity of modernizing agents and programmes must be understood in light of multiple historical backgrounds, but also in relation to the multiple institutional configurations that make up the historical field of modernity. Blokker concludes with a plea for abandoning the one-dimensional model of success or failure stories and moving towards more context-sensitive research.

Notes

- 1 For a representative selection from this debate, see Schöpffin (1989).
- 2 To counter a possible objection, it should be noted that Yugoslav Communism was not in the same category. Yugoslavia was never incorporated into the Soviet Empire. Rather, a Communist regime that had risen to power largely through its own efforts (but closely connected to Soviet victory in World War II) first asserted its autonomy through a particularly extreme application of the Soviet model, as well as through a foreign policy more overtly committed to revolutionary aims. When this led to open conflict with the Soviet leadership, the Yugoslav regime had to adjust to a new geopolitical situation and redefine its relationship to its domestic basis. This was achieved through a limited but genuine and effective scaling down of the totalitarian project.
- 3 For the idea of a 'Far Eastern Europe' between East Central Europe and Russia (on this view, the latter becomes an intermediate region between Europe and Inner Eurasia), see Szporluk (1991).
- 4 For Halecki, West Central Europe was simply synonymous with Germany. The only noteworthy later attempt to give this notion a more substantive sense was made by Ferdinand Seibt (1989); he extended it to western margins and neighbours of the Holy Roman Empire, and stressed, in particular, the importance of the Burgundian connection for the early modern ascendancy of the Habsburg dynasty.

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