Identities, politics and post-Communism in Central Europe*

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It is has become customary on these occasions to say a few things about Ernest Gellner as a person and not only do I not want to deviate from this custom, but I do want to say something about Ernest as a Central European. I was never a student of his, but I came to know him reasonably well as a colleague. Indeed, one of my first academic experiences was to undertake a joint supervision with Ernest, on a Czech topic, of which he knew far more than I did. It was a humbling experience. I was privileged to hear Ernest's last public lecture, in Budapest, on the day before he died, and I recall well how he had been reluctant to speak at all, but then spoke off the cuff for half an hour – cogently and clearly as ever.

It was only after Ernest's untimely death that I began to appreciate what the Central European side of his personality meant and, for what it's worth, stimulated me to try and define my own Central Europeanness. Of course, there were differences. There was a difference in generations. He had taken part in the war, I was merely a target, being that much younger. Then, there are real differences between the Czech and Hungarian identities, but I saw the shared qualities as well. I saw notably how Ernest's sense of humour and irony were not unlike the way in which I understood the cultural norms in which I lived, and equally how many people did not understand them and disliked them, though they were generally too polite to say so.

There is something specific about Central European irony which, I would like to suggest, grows directly out of what will be one of the main themes of this lecture – the particularities of Central Europe and its view of the world. I believe that Central European irony was and is a response to one of the less appealing features of Central European discourse, its vulnerability to self-pity, to a sense of fatalism, a weakness of agency. The standard response, which is a central facet of the national self in the region, is a kind of intense emotionally charged articulation of nationhood, an overwhelming sense of belonging, which saps one's critical faculties, makes one weak towards one's faults as a nation and hypersensitive towards real or, as often as not, perceived injuries.

This emotionalism functions as an extraordinarily powerful cognitive closure, a screening out – one cannot and will not see anything other than what the national self tells us to see. To an extent, all collectivities do this, they all screen out aspects of the world that jar, that do not conform (Douglas, 1986). For any self-respecting intellectual, and as we know, Central Europe is the truest home of Continental intellectuals, this is intolerable because it is threatening, it threatens their autonomy, their real or hoped for detachment from whatever they are investigating. It hardly needs saying that strong emotion shuts out reason.

There are two responses, and both of them were central to Ernest's strategies – they are irony and rationality. Ernest's sense of humour, then, which so many found disturbing, was – I believe – transferred from its natural Central European habitat to Britain and British academic life. It made his style wholly memorable. I can still remember Ernest giving an early account of his theory of nationalism at a seminar. During questions, someone made the point that if industrialisation was the motor of national mobilisation, then how come that pre-industrial nations could come into being. 'I am vulnerable to that', he replied, with a wry smile.

His insistence on rationality, at the same time, became his lodestar, his overriding answer to a troubled and troubling world. I further believe that the continued role of identity, of identity as a source of reasoning, of particular identities remained one of his enduring concerns. His response to this concern illuminates much of his later work – I do not feel that I have to list them here.

All of this raises the questions, what exactly is an identity, how it is to be understood, how identities are constructed and why? This is the next topic to which I want to turn.

Identity construction

I am, of course, dealing here with collective identities and I would like to stress that we all have both individual and collective identities, that we are members of many collective identity groups and that individual and collective identities are in some form of reciprocal potentiation. My second methodological assumption is that identities, in common with all human activity, are constructed. Indeed, I regard what I call Durkheim's dilemma as a guiding thought: if we human beings make our world, then how come that we are compelled by what we make?

It is to this dilemma that I would like to devote some thought, because – I would like to suggest – some of the answers that trouble us today at the level of practical politics, as well as of nationalism theory, can be discerned there. In particular, there is a very powerful line of thought with the potency of an axiology, that the legacy of Enlightenment rationality has the cogency to make us all universalists, indeed in some thinkers, the duty to accept universal values. It is this assumption that lies at the heart of what might be called simple identity

construction, not least in the work of Hobsbawm and Anderson (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Anderson, 1991), both of whom imply that if particular identities are constructed, then they can just as readily be deconstructed. The axiology of both Hobsbawm and Anderson is focused, at any rate indirectly, on this target.

The problem then arises, if identities can be so readily unmasked, why do they persist? Is it that people are really stupid, that they cannot hear the falconer? That they prefer to listen to false prophets? You will recognise this trope not least from the numerous student essays that I have had to read, the argument of which turns on the proposition of 'elite manipulation'. Are people, who – you will remember are meant to be rational – really so malleable, so ready to sell their rationalist birthright for a mess of nationalist pottage? Or is it that nationalist elites are super-cunning, a bit like Lenin's 'crafty bourgeois', who was seemingly always cleverer than the honest proletarian?

I don't believe these explanations for a second. Instead, I would like to suggest that identity, far from being irrational, offers a rationality of its own and, indeed, that neither a universalistic nor a particularistic perspective satisfactorily resolves these problems. Rather, the two have to be examined together, acting upon one another. The starting point, I would like to suggest, is that as human beings our own knowledge of the world, our vision, is invariably and necessarily partial and particular. Cognitive processes screen out much of the ideas and information that we receive, otherwise we would suffer overload (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995). This means that we repeatedly encounter phenomena to which we do not have answers, but to which we respond conventionally.

Convention, of course, implies that some form of collective knowledge has come into being and that we rely on it to make sense of the world; sensemaking inevitably requires us to simplify, to construct stereotypes, to cut out a great deal of information as superfluous, to take things for granted (Weick, 1996). The expert systems on which we rely so much are a typical case in point – we do not feel impelled to reinvent the internal combustion engine every time we sit in a car. We just assume that it will work (Giddens, 1990). That is a fairly universal and quite concrete example. But most of what we regard as 'common sense' is structurally identical, though rather more particularistic. English common sense reflects the particular assumptions of the English and French 'common sense', if I can use such a strongly Anglo-Saxon term, is quite different.

The question, then, is how these conventional forms of knowledge come into being and how they shape our sense of self, what effect do they have on our encounters with others, who understand the world from a wholly different set of assumptions, whose forms of collective knowledge do not resemble ours at all? Clearly, even at the most elementary level, we encounter a communication problem, one that becomes more and more complex the deeper we delve into the world of otherness. At the same time, through our encounters with otherness, our own sense of self, our own identity is reinforced. Identity is

necessarily relational so that contact with otherness is both positive and negative (Simmel, 1950), which incidentally makes the invention of the neologistic verb, 'to other' something or someone rather pointless.

The upshot of the argument so far is that collectivities have both an inward and an outward dimension. The inward dimension is what gives an identity group its cohesion; its outwardness, its sense of particularity. This inward dimension is not, of course, total. There are always external influences that impact on a collectivity, and it is the task of the inward processes to secure cohesion on an ongoing basis. This proposition raises two questions: one is what exactly is it that has come into being, what is a collectivity, as I have termed it; and the second is what is it for, why have collectivities and the identities that are constructed by them? The questions are necessarily interdependent.

The answer to the first question, what a collectivity is, is best approached by regarding it as a form of shared human activity, a set of processes that people are engaged in, and as a form of human action that can be interpreted, understood and read. As such, it is perfectly possible to read identities as a text. Anything can be a text in this sense, a language (of course), a social process, a building, a ritual, a crowd, whatever (Brown, 1987). And in a collectivity as text, as a set of complex, interactive communications, the exchanges that take place do so in a set framework, which we can properly call a field and the content of these exchanges can be said to constitute a form of discourse. Thus we can see that in this form it becomes methodologically feasible to interpret identity construction and to take the next step, and try to understand what purpose an identity collective serves.

To understand this proposition, therefore, we have to go back to something that I argued earlier – to world-making and sensemaking. The world and the inputs that we receive are infinite and in order to make sense of these informational inputs, we have to reduce them to comprehensibility. But for communication to be effective, the individuals engaged in communicating must have a set of shared meanings, a conventionally determined set of collective criteria for decoding the world. Collective identities are at the centre of this activity. The criteria by which we understand the world are particular, are specific to one group rather than another, they differ among themselves and they are reproduced over time, otherwise there would be chaos. And if there is one phenomenon that human collectivities detest it is chaos, the inconsistencies of understandings and meanings with which we collide when disorder strikes. This is deeply troubling, indeed it triggers off the deepest fears and crises of human life.

Hence collectivities engage in a range of activities to ensure that such a crisis of meanings does not take place. They construct narratives about themselves which attribute virtue and vice, which define the ground-rules of good and evil, which regulate the ethical norms of that particular collectivity. They try to sustain these norms by encoding them in such a form as to make them as difficult as possible to decode and question. To attain this, they rely on forms of

collective shorthand, like myth (narratives of self), symbol (charging objects and events with particular significance) and ritual (collective action that can generate solidarity without consensus). These are all collective texts that can be read and understood, which does not mean that this is an easy activity. Collective texts condense meaning, they function as agreed criteria by which the collectivity conducts its affairs. These collective texts can be regarded as a thought-world (Douglas, 1996). It follows from what I have said that collectivities are engaged in producing collective norms, they are identity-collectives of moral value creation and, in that sense, they seek recognition as moral communities.

Furthermore, collectivities erect boundaries to demarcate themselves from other collectivities (Barth, 1969; Donnan and Wilson, 1999). Much has been written and said about the permeability of boundaries, some will argue that as a concept boundaries are meaningless, that it is the ability to cross boundaries that is important. Maybe so, but the boundaries have to be understood if we are also to recognise how they may be crossed. Transgressivity is only viable if there is something to transgress. Boundary mechanisms have a further purpose – they regulate the traffic, they filter out certain ideas and qualities of received information, they secure the consistency of the collective identity and no amount of deconstruction will change this.

Anything can be a boundary mechanism, from dress code to dietary codes, but possibly the single most important such mechanism is language. Language as a concept is much misunderstood (Lotman, 2001a,b). It exists at three separate though interconnected levels and it is essential to bear this in mind when we analyse what language is. There is, first, the most obvious, the philological level, which tells us that English, say, is a particular language and French is another. Without studying them, there is no automatic communica-tion between them. The second level is cultural. Here specific meanings evolve, attached to local particularities, and give philological language a denser, more concentrated set of meanings. All languages at this level also become repositories of collective memory, of psychological complexity, of nuance and diversity.

At this level, we can see that British English and American are philologically the same language, but there are many situations in which they are culturally different, with a different sense being given to bits of vocabulary, not to mention accent and register, and – in this instance – contextuality. Notoriously, British English is a very high context language and meaning is conveyed by phrasing, omission, body language, tone, facial expression and so on – all the features that make British English so hard for non-Brits to understand.

The third level is political. When a language comes to be used as a language for articulating power, it will necessarily acquire the qualities associated with such power. Thus it will develop in various ways, like accumulate a political, administrative and military vocabulary. More significantly, the holders of power will use that language for legitimation and, crucially, to establish as far as possible a monological set of meanings, a maximally unambiguous and

unchallengeable language in which truth-claims acquire the sense of being the sole truth and the natural way of being. At both the cultural and the political levels, language comes to acquire a symbolic, identity-marking quality. When those who use it feel that it is under threat, they will try to defend it, by excluding loan-words for example. Elites or elites together with non-elites will construct new vocabularies – the way in which different languages have coped with the Internet is one illustration. Sixteenth century English was regarded as no longer effective in trying to express the full range of meanings that its practitioners wanted to express, hence the extraordinary accumulation of new words at the time (Shakespeare was only one innovator among others).

Once the process of transforming a cultural language into a political language has been launched, the relationship between language and political identity becomes reciprocal (Lotman, 2001a,b). The language is used by that particular collectivity as a part of its identity and it will differentiate it from others. The ideas – forms of knowledge – that are so expressed will further strengthen the collective self. The arrival of the new, whether material or non-material, will then demand adjustment and thereby cultural reproduction becomes an ongoing process.

All the foregoing is to be understood as the preliminary argument about the rise of nationhood. The definition of nationhood to be adopted, it should be stressed, will to some degree determine which aspects of the theory of nationalism is to be foregrounded. For my purposes, the nation is above all a political category, a particular way of structuring the relationship between rulers and ruled. This does not mean that nations do not have cultural, sociological, anthropological or other dimensions, they do, but I would argue that without understanding the political dimension, too much is lost. If nationhood is about anything, it is about political power and it is from the perspective of political power that this analysis will proceed.

Not least, the category 'nation', or better, the Latin *natio*, had a political significance in pre-modernity. It referred to those with the right of access to politics and political power – the aristocracy, the higher clergy, certain burgesses, with the monarch above them all. Hence nations did indeed exist in the Middle Ages, but their content and quality were quite different from what we regard as nations today. I do not think that it needs any serious argument to clarify this proposition. The political arrangements to deal with 3 or 4 percent of the population will be wholly different from the needs of a political system that notionally includes the entire population of a given territory.

The question is, how did we get here from there? This has been one of the central questions raised by the great debate on nationalism of the last two decades, the one to which Gellner and many others contributed. I will offer a further proposition here. I will take it as common ground that we all accept that there is such a thing as modernity (Hastings, 1997), even if we may disagree about what precisely constitutes that modernity.

To my mind, modernity can be identified because something changed in Europe in or around the 18th century. For Gellner, the change, and this was a

radical change that precipitated more changes, was the coming of industrialism. I would like to argue something different. Something did change, but it was not the industrial mode of production. Rather, from the 16th century on, the state – the political ruler – acquired an enormously increased capacity to condense power. A variety of factors combined to produce this change. In the first instance, I would like to mention the vastly increased information storage capacity generated by printing. Anderson writes of 'print capitalism' (Anderson, 1991); I would like to suggest that as a motor of change, 'print etatism' was far more significant. For the first time, the ruler had the capacity to expand and intensify record keeping and thereby make his or her subjects 'legible' (Scott, 1998). This development had far-reaching implications for a range of other activities, like military planning and organisation. Crucially, it permitted the ruler to extend the power of the state over taxation and coercion.

Now the exercise of power should be understood as having a reciprocal relationship at its heart. Power is as a rule more effective if it is exercised consensually, if the people who are taxed and coerced accept this as a part of the natural order, as a part of their identity (Hall, 1994). The people over whom the newly enhanced power of the state was to be exercised were no longer the ones who readily accepted the mediaeval order of secular and religious hierarchy – feudalism and universal Catholicism. The Reformation and secularisation made inroads into the authority of the Church and non-feudal forms of power relationships showed that alternative models were possible. Crucially, the print revolution affected society too, in several ways. Literacy was no longer the preserve of maybe 2–3 percent of the population, but was spreading, not least as a result of the insistence of Protestantism on script literacy. The intellectual explosion through the ready availability of information rippled through society (Israel, 2001), while simultaneously economic growth provided a rising number of people with the material security that only a very few had enjoyed previously. The outcome was a legitimation crisis by the 18th century (Wehler, 2001).

The Republic of Letters that launched the Enlightenment offered the world three heady propositions. These were emancipation or freedom; the speculative unity of all knowledge; and the unification of all into a single, transcendental, universal identity of reason (Coupe, 1997 identifies the first two). The French revolution was the culmination of the project of emancipation and it has been with us ever since. Both unity of knowledge and the universality of reason continue to structure how we see the world to this day.

But if the protagonists of universalism thought that they could replace the decaying political structures of neo-feudalism and religious order only by arguing from reason, they were mistaken. They were mistaken for a number of reasons, possibly the most cogent of which was the assumption that there was only one single way of understanding universal reason. The response to the truth-claim of a single universal set of norms was a mixture of anxiety, of marginality, of reaction. The universalists had overstated their position. They believed that their epistemology was valid for the whole world, whereas in

reality it reflected the contingent power – political, economic, intellectual – of Western Europe, primarily France, England and the Netherlands. In effect, the rapid development of intellectual capital in these communities had the unintended consequence of producing uneven intellectual development. Gellner himself used uneven development in its material dimension as an explanatory factor for the spread of nationalism, but there is every benefit to be had from extending it to intellectuality as well (Gellner, 1964).

This brief exposition of the intellectual order of the 18th century will allow us to look at the political dimension of developments. The legitimation crisis of the old order, the erosion of feudalism and religion; the growing power of the state; and the rising demand for access to power on the part of a range of people far wider than the members of the mediaeval nation came together to produce two outcomes. One of these was the pressing need to find a mode of consent to be ruled by new means that would modify the old, but not threaten the beneficiaries of the old order too much, to preserve a dignified degree of continuity. And the other was to invent a political form, a new structure of governance, with its own legitimating discourses that would allow a far-reaching distribution of power.

No one is going to give power away unless they have to. But they can be persuaded or forced to do so. By persuading, I mean reform; by being forced to, I mean revolution. Europe has been the scene of both. What the 18th century saw was both. The discourses to legitimate the distribution of power were in place by 1789 and the fact that the French revolution took a coercive turn did nothing to alter that. In essence, the discourse of nationhood, which as we have seen had been the discursive field employed to legitimate access to power, was redefined in such a way as make access to power open to all the inhabitants of a territory, thereby eventually converting them from subjects to citizens. They could all be defined as members of the nation.

This left open one further problem, one that did not affect the pioneers in the short term, but has come to haunt all the latecomers, including the Central Europeans to whom I will presently turn. Who is to be a member of the nation? How is the identity – whether directly political or non-political – constructed around nationhood to be defined? If cultural norms are to play a role in access to political power, then how are these to be determined? What of the myth-symbol complex and the boundary mechanisms? And quite apart from anything else, how are the latecomers supposed to respond? Are they free to define their nations? Lacking their own access to political power, how should they act?

In fact, the pioneers did not greatly care, at least not in the first instance. They used the raw materials to hand and condensed cultural power together with the political. But matters were nothing like as straightforward for the latecomers. They found themselves in a set of dilemmas and had to struggle to establish their claims. To some degree, this is still the case.

The very success of political and cultural modernity as embodied in the nation became both a threat to and an opportunity for the latecomers. It was

threatening because the unevenness of power directly affected their capacity for cultural reproduction. The terms on which they were allowed to exist were transformed without any serious input from them. The Napoleonic years were certainly a threat to Britain, but how much more of a threat were they to Central Europe, where the Napoleonic armies marched without so much as a by-your-leave and where the ruling empires swapped territories as if they were stamps?

Central Europe

Let me move then to the last part of this analysis, to Central Europe. If we look at the trajectory of Central Europe, we find a pattern that is wholly different from the one that we are familiar with in the West. From the 16th century onwards, the region has been the scene of a series of attempted transformations – modernisations, if you like – that are brought in from outside, that may have local champions, but the underlying ideas of which are developed elsewhere and in response to the needs of elsewhere. It is this semi-subordinate or wholly subordinate relationship to external power, whether political or cultural, that can be said to characterise the region and to generate the responses that are variously described as indeterminacy, incompleteness, hybridity, coupled with dependency and self-pity. Trying to define and redefine oneself in the face of much stronger external power, from a position of weakness, is never an exalting experience.

   In chronological order, then, the first of these external transformations was the Counter-Reformation or, more properly, the Catholic Reformation. It introduced a new set of discourses, a new concept of order, and did so in competition – continuous competition – with Protestantism. It is important to recognise that while Catholicism had the upper hand in most of Central Europe, it seldom had a free hand. The Catholic Reformation was never fully consensual. Protestant modes lived on and informed attitudes in a variety of ways, sometimes overtly, sometimes underground. The values of the Counter-Reformation were an emphasis on hierarchy and obedience, on visuality rather than literacy, on community rather than individualism, on the value of wholeness rather than accuracy of detail. Protestantism can be seen as a counterpoint to this and it has been the seed-bed of resistance, of determination, of obstinacy even. Counter-Reformation thinking has had one further legacy of major significance: it prefers to look at structures and to identify them whenever possible in decoding the world. This can result in very cogent insights, but it also weakens agency by making individual action appear futile in the face of insurmountable structural obstacles.

   I have spent a bit of time on this polarity, because it constitutes a good part of the cultural capital with which the region confronted modernity and, therefore, the cognitive models with which the region sought to define its own models of modernity. The Counter-Reformation style, the Baroque, remains in

being and is clearly recognisable as a key element in the Central European thought-style.

The next attempt at transformation was the imperial one, the attempt by the absolutist state to construct a high capacity state that could compete with the centres of power emerging in the West. This project was fairly typical of modernisations from above – it took what it liked from the external model and omitted the bits that it did not, in this instance the proposition that power should be exercised consensually. After all, who has ever heard of a consensual empire anyway? What these transformations produced were new hybrids and a sense of fear in the sub-elites of the region that they would be levelled down by the imperial centres. The model was already there with the partitions of Poland. In order to survive, the sub-elites had to find means to resist the imperial projects and they did so by devising an anti-hybrid. They took up the discourse of nationalism and married it to their own neo-feudal privileges, which were the basis of their power vis-a-vis the empires.

And because they were in a weak position to condense political power on this basis, they employed what they could, cultural power, which became the basis of the ethnic definition of nationhood. It was a logical step in the circumstances, but it had far-reaching and, of course, unintended consequences. It brought into being the ethnic path-dependence that still marks these political communities.

This is not a history lecture, so I shall not dwell on the details of what followed. In sum, the Central Europeans spent the 19th century struggling against the empires and against one another in order to define and construct their own viable models of modernity. They took the idea of nationhood as the basic template, thereby yet again relying on the West for their impulse. The problem was, as ever, that what might have been appropriate in the West, functioned differently elsewhere. The outcome of the process of constructing nations in Central Europe was eventually successful in procuring statehood, but it had other, less desirable consequences too.

Constructing models of modernity that were viable and recognisable was no easy task. The empires, the losers from the process, were not going to give in easily, and this fed the Central Europeans' sense of frustration and resentment. The problem was this. Recognition of one's existence now had a new-old criterion – political power. Whereas before the coming of modernity, political power was, as we have seen, linked to the mediaeval *natio*, the contours and content of modern nationhood were different. The new dispensation, the one brought into being by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, was contradictory. It gave already recognised political entities further recognition, but unrecognised entities could not claim the status of being nations and could, therefore, be subjected to the modernising attempts of the empires, which threatened them with absorption.

Hence the new order in effect prompted the Central Europeans to shake off imperial rule by whatever means were to hand. This was precisely what the Greeks did in the 1820s and the Serbs from 1806, as somehow the Ottoman

Empire was just a little less equal than the Austrian, Prussian and Russian. But the lesson was not lost on the Central Europeans. They had to define their nations with a political dimension, in order to extract political autonomy from the imperial ruler, something that the latter was most reluctant to give away. What we can see here is the collision of discourses – that of empire and that of nationhood.

Nations were invariably more successful in generating consent and greater dynamism, so that time was on their side, but it often did not seem so to contemporaries. The inertial forces of empire, like Kaisertreue, coupled with the size of the pre-political population, the peasantry, worked to delay the coming of independence. The collision of empire and nationhood thus inhibited the capacity to democratise these populations and political communities.

The threatened local elites saw that they had no real choice. They might start from aristocratic privilege as their source of power, but they understood that they had to modernise it if they were to survive, and modernisation necessarily meant adopting and adapting the heady ideas of the French revolution – access to political power on the part of all. This adaptation is the key. The local elites had pre-modern power and sought to modernise it by making it national power. Nationhood, given the power of the empires to inhibit political autonomy, had only one place to go – into culture. These elites, then, had to rely on the definition of a culture as the source of the power and that meant mobilising constituencies to support that power. Membership of the culturally defined nation was the Central European answer to the challenge of the French revolution.

The length of the struggle ensured that these local elites, which changed in composition as the century wore on, were able to spread their message into the core of the potential nation, though there were always problems at the periphery. Further, the relationship between cultural power and political power became inextricable. So the line of argument fashionable today, that seeks to decouple political power from culture – culture as ethnic mobilisation – and to make power the exclusive attribute of citizenship is unlikely to be effective in the short term, if at all. Political power and ethnic identity cannot be decoupled, given that the state will always have a role in cultural reproduction, making control of the state a key target of political action.

But the movement for nationhood as a political-cultural guarantor of cultural reproduction did not stop with collectivities that already had their own political discourses and some degree of political power, however limited. It spread to groups which were able to define themselves without such a resource. In this instance, the movement was exclusively cultural, relying overwhelmingly on language, and by the end of the First World War, they too were able to demand and gain recognition. Self-definition in cultural terms was always contingent. The particular circumstances of history, the configuration of power, sometimes geographic factors, the nature of the elite with which they had to contend – all these could be relevant in the emergence of new nations.

With the settlement that followed the First World War, state independence became a reality in Central Europe, even while it had also come into being in South-Eastern Europe. In the sense of preserving cultural reproduction, independence was a success. In respect of creating space for consent, democracy and citizenship, of taking up the other message of the French revolution, it was something of a failure. State-national independence does not inherently produce democracy or stability, though it may be a step in the right direction.

The problem for the Central Europeans was that their models of modernity were incomplete, their models of completeness were unattainable and their models of nationhood were predicated on a degree of cultural homogeneity that were irreconcilable with democracy. Above all, the lure of the Jacobin model of centralisation of the state and of cultural power was taken to be the Western standard. In this connection, too, irony broke in. Just as the empires failed to understand that without consent, the state could only condense limited amounts of power, so the newly independent Central European states did likewise. They sought to condense cultural and political power and neglected the consensual, the civic side of the equation. The outcome was something close to state failure, helped from time to time by the interventions of the Great Powers.

In each case, Polish, Czech and Hungarian elites discovered that as late-comers to modernity, the models taken over from the West did not produce the intended outcomes, but generated resistance from other national collectivities and from sections of their own society. The experiment was a failure. This had its own consequences after 1945, in terms of rejection of the past and of the West – quite explicit in the case of the Czechs – and vulnerability to the seductiveness of a communist alternative. Communism, however, proved to be yet another externally imposed modernisation and another failure.

There is a reason for these failures and it is one with a direct relevance to the post-1989 period. Without a domestic model of modernity, or at any rate a sense of being a modern nation, the externally derived aspects of modernity will invariably grate against the domestic tradition, against the grain of cultural expectations and aspirations. Yet the difficulty for the Central Europeans is that while they need the requisite degree of condensed cultural power to produce adequate state administrative capacity to generate a uniform distribution of authority, the elites lacked the confidence in the population that they were sufficiently unified culturally to allow more redistribution of power. The road to citizenship and democracy was blocked.

Can the democratic systems introduced after 1989 break this vicious cycle? On balance the answer is yes, but there are, as ever, problems. The political and cultural thought-styles of Central Europe are out of alignment with those of the West, roughly the contrast is between the moralising and historicising approach of the former as against the emphasis on procedure and pragmatics of the latter. The mere reception of democratic institutions is not in itself a guarantee of a democratic way of doing things.

What the West has done in the last decade or more, especially when European Union membership came on the agenda, has been to insist on the Central Europeans reaching a given set of norms – the Copenhagen criteria, in brief. This conditionality has simply been imposed, there has been no serious attempt to debate the principles of European democracy.

The negotiations for membership have been largely technocratic and have not produced the kind of normative debate that would encourage populations to internalise the values that the West foregrounds. The outcome has been paradoxical – the closer a post-communist state gets to actual membership of the European Union, the lower the enthusiasm for joining. The West has not been prepared to engage with the symbolic and historic dimension of European enlargement so vital to Central Europe's sense of self-esteem, with the result that Europeanness remains remote and abstract. In effect, the European Union by adopting the negotiating style that it did has unwittingly exported its own democratic deficit eastwards.

The worst-case scenario may well be to reproduce the sense of incompleteness, the hybridity and indeterminacy that have haunted Central Europe for centuries. Their own thought-styles and thought-worlds, while specific to them, are seen as a nuisance and as backward in the West, and they are effectively denied the chance of constructing their own, domestic models of modernity. This will not change markedly even after EU membership comes into being in 2004, because Central Europe will have to conform to whatever the West decides. So, if nothing else, the Central European way of interpreting the world, with its contradictions and paradoxes, its ironies and dependences, its attractive and negative features are very likely to live on.

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