

RETHINKING CENTRAL-EUROPEAN CULTURAL IDENTITY: RESTORATION, TRANSITION OR RECONSTRUCTION?

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The article discusses issues of cultural identity as applied to and exhibited in the current period of social transformation in post-communist Central Europe, and especially the case of the community of people in Slovakia. The aim is to clarify who we Central Europeans are, based on our cultural identities. It is a philosophical reflection on Central European culture, its current shape and its historical roots. The author considers three main options for the future of Central-European cultural identity: restoration, transition and reconstruction.

Introduction

Substantial and far-reaching changes have been taking place in Europe, a continent of old cultures rooted in strong traditions, in the past decade. Along with progressing integration in Western Europe, another crucial and in many ways even more complex process that has brought with it a lot of new issues, has come to the fore: the restructuralization in Central and Eastern Europe after the breakdown of the communist regimes in 1989. Now that the project of a single and united Europe has started to appear more realistic, it is by no means any simpler more immediate. As those involved in European integration very soon came to realize, the crux of the problem is: *culture* (see Tonra and Dunne, 1997). It is obvious to everyone that Europe is a multi-coloured continent from a cultural point of view, and that where politics, economy, science and technology may unite various communities, nations and regions, culture may divide them. So how, if at all, is an integrated European culture or a united European cultural identity possible?

Culture has recently become not only an intellectually interesting topic but also a highly relevant issue, socially and politically. As Samuel Huntington (1996, 20) stated in his classic, it is

culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, [that] are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world.

And according to Edward Said (1994, xiv), culture that is the source of identity, is neither politically neutral nor politically innocent but it

is a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another. Far from being a placid realm of Apollonian gentility, culture can even be a battleground on which causes expose themselves to the light of day and contend with one another...

Thus a politics of integration that did not take into account various cultural identities and differences, would only repeat the old scenarios of colonialism and imperialism. To avoid adopting such a politics means to understand people, and to understand people we have to understand their cultures, which form their deepest identity.¹ But culture sometimes seems to be the most fixed or conservative element within human community and attempts to change it mean trying to change something which can only be altered very slowly and with many difficulties. Political upheaval is not identical to cultural change at all, and while the former may trigger the latter, it is far from clear what, when referring to the culture of a particular community, should be transformed or how it should be carried out.

The contemporary socio-cultural situation in Central Europe is still quite complex and demands much deeper reflection if we are to understand it, let alone influence and manage it. After abolishing more than 40 years of a communist rule, it is not sufficient to return to pre-communist Central Europe and to restore something outdated. What is needed more is the creation of something new, even if it is based on a certain traditional European legacy and its associated values.

This article discusses issues of cultural identity as applied to and exhibited in the current period of social transformation in post-communist Central Europe, and especially the case of the community of people in Slovakia. But this is not particularly an essay on nation, nationalism and national identity.² Even if we acknowledge the meaning of national identity, our approach is sympathetic to that of Martin J. Matušík (1993) who speaks of "postnational identity" as a broader and open-ended concept. The aim of this article is to clarify who we Central Europeans are, based on our cultural identities. Are we Westerners, Easterners, or a people whose fate is to remain "somewhere in between"? However, this is not an empirical study either, rather it is a (philosophical) reflection on Central European culture, its current shape and its historical roots. It is an attempt to contribute in helping those who struggle with questions such as: What are our main cultural patterns of thought, behaviour and communication in Central Europe? What are our main shared values? What models and ways of life do we prefer to live? What types of society do we form and desire to live in? What should we preserve from our

¹ Philosophers have realized this in their conception of the politics of recognition or multiculturalism. See Gutman (1994), Barša (1999).

² A vast amount of writings has been published on these issues in the past decade, especially with respect to Central and Eastern Europe. See Pynsent (1994).

cultures and what should be transformed and transgressed? Do we have to change our identity and why? Is it at all possible and how? What intelligent instruments do we possess for coping with these socio-cultural changes and conflicts?

Central Europe, in contrast to some regions of Eastern and Southern Europe, has almost always been a fairly peaceful and stable region. This is not a part of Europe where harsh conflicts have erupted in the past, and there is a hope that this should remain so in the future as well. Why is this? One might again look to the particular traditions, values and attitudes that form the special cultural identity of the peoples of Central Europe.

Nonetheless, what is the meaning of the discourse of cultural identity? For whom does it make sense? Only for “us”, or for those “others”? Who is interested in who we are or what kind of people we are?

Culture and identity: the concept of cultural identity

Two terms have taken central place in the contemporary thought of human affairs: *culture and identity*. Human beings are natural beings creating culture and living in culture as a continuation of nature with different means. The idea of culture has replaced in its centrality such concepts as “society”, “ideology”, “civilization” and even the concept of “nature”.³ It has been argued that culture, in the broadest sense, is all we should study if we want to understand human beings. Moreover, culture has become not only the prime topic for most treatments in the humanities and social sciences but also a kind of a “paradigm”, through which we have to see the human world. The importance of the phenomenon of culture for human identity has given rise in theory and practice to the post-modern movement of “culturalism” and “multiculturalism” (see e. g. Goldberg 1996, Fay 1996). However, this line of contemporary thought about the crucial meaning of culture could be regarded as the third stage of which there have been at least two major predecessors.⁴

The first was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a German romantic, who opposed the universalism of the Enlightenment, and came up with the idea that culture is a particular community-based phenomenon and that there are as many cultures as there are communities, e. g. nations; and that each particular culture has its own character and its own value. Each culture is, according to Herder, like a living organism with its exceptionality and potential to grow. There is no such thing as a universal culture of mankind and we should appreciate that particular cultural identities are different from each other rather than strive for a united one.

³ For the development of the idea of culture in modern thought see Eagleton (2000).

⁴ At least two because some others could be mentioned as well, such as Vico, Hume, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Hamann.

The limits of a particular social group are the limits of its special culture. Culture is something that distinguishes not only humans from animals but also one human group from another. Historicism, contextualism, pluralism and even relativism as opposed to universalism and ethnocentrism are current labels often given to this Herderian philosophy of culture (see Herder 1968).

The second arises from this romantic spirit of the 18th century, when the Western social and cultural anthropology (including ethnography, ethnology and folkloristics) of the end of the 19th century was born (see Budil 2001, 365-369) with its interest in comparative studies of various so-called primitive (or 'pre-logical' and 'pre-scientific') non-Western cultures. This has been a factual corroboration and further development of the Herderian idea of culture. One of the acknowledged founding fathers of this discipline, Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), though himself still a classical ethnocentrist, extended the definition of culture as follows:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor 1958, 1).

Social and cultural anthropology started to describe and advocate the *cultural diversity* of human communities (as analogous to the biological diversity of species). Each social group has its own distinctive culture, which forms and informs the lives and behaviour of its members in multiple ways. Culture thus understood is identical to a way of life, broadly conceived, or to "texts" and practices of everyday life. Culture refers to all that which people have created in order to adapt to their environment; it is transmitted socially and has to be learnt. Culture is something that is substantially characteristic of a social group or community and its members.

Herder was also the first to apply the concept of culture in the sense of *cultural identity* (cf. also Hartman 1997, 211). Herder believed that each of us is what we are because of the social group to which we belong and its culture. However, apart from this idea of culture, Herder did not develop the idea of cultural identity. His thought was in line with the modern (Cartesian, mentalistic) discourse (whose proponents were also Vico, Montesquieu, Hume, Helvetius, Kant, Fichte, Hegel and others), in which the term "*the spirit of nations*" is employed. This discourse was adapted further by other German romantics, notably Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) who wrote of national character (*Nationalcharacter*) and national spirit (*Völkgeist*) as the metaphysical spiritual entity that explains the history and behaviour of social groups such as nations. These ideas inspired Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899) and Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903) to found the "psychology of nations" or "folk psychology" (*Völkerpsychologie*). Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) followed with his influential 10-volume classic, "Elements of Psychology of Nations" published in 1911-1918. Even the work of Franz Boas (1858-1942), the founder of American social anthropology, was shaped by this approach. However, it was

through him and the work of his students that the relationship between a collective “spirit” and “identity” started to become clearer.

To summarize this historical excursion: a shift from psychology to anthropology led to the replacement of the modern discourse of a collective “national spirit” with the postmodern discourse of collective “cultural identity”. In other words, while for modern psychologists and other intellectuals⁵ it was mentality as a part of ahistorical “human nature”(either with rationality, mind and consciousness or with emotionality, sense and feeling as its essence) that produced culture in all its forms: (language, traditions, everyday style of life and behaviour etc.). For postmodern anthropologists it is, *vice versa*, culture that produces mentality. So rather than discuss psychology, mentality and spirit we should speak of anthropology, culture and cultural identity. If there is such a thing as a “national spirit” or “national character” at all, it does not represent the metaphysical mental essence but the psychological expression of collective group culture. Traditionally it has been thought that national spirit or character or mentality is expressed through national culture. Today this relationship has been reversed: culture is expressed in mentality because this mentality is formed by culture. To study cultural identity is to study culture (cultural studies, anthropology) not psychology (though there also exists the new discipline of cultural psychology). Further, it may be argued that so-called “human nature” which was so heavily sought and celebrated by modern philosophers is nothing other than the socio-cultural identity we first adopt and then help re-create within the specific community we were born into and live in.

A conceptual shift that can be considered analogous has occurred with respect to the way in which human *individual* or *personal identity* is understood. The term identity,⁶ in relation to human beings has largely been developed in psychology,⁷ where it means a relatively stable (fixed) structure of an individual’s *psyche* or personality, that is, a set of psychological characteristics, which individuals exhibit throughout their lives via their attitudes, behaviour, etc. Thus if we know a person’s identity, then we know that person, we know who she is and what can be expected of her. Many psychological theories have been developed which define this concept, but today the traditional Cartesian-Lockean approach, which locates identity solely within the individual and her mind/body unity may be regarded as

⁵ For example, Ernest Renan (1993, 290) the great French theologian, made the following perspicacious remark in his speech at the Sorbonne in 1882: “A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things that are in reality only one make this soul, this spiritual principle. One is possessing in common a rich heritage of memories, the other the present perception, the wish to live together, the will to uphold the heritage that has come down to us undivided.”

⁶ Identity in general means a set of characteristics that makes a certain entity the thing that it is and not something else.

⁷ Though it was philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) who first introduced the issue of personal identity in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: (1609), Book 2: Chapter 27.

having been transcended by the conception that every personal identity is constructed by a socio-cultural setting (see Shotter and Gergen 1989, Harré 1983). Culture, again, is crucial here, in the sense that every human identity is in some way a cultural phenomenon that is a *cultural identity*. Cultural identity means that a person achieves the fullest humanity within an accepted context of traditional symbols, judgments, values, behaviour and relationships with all others who self-consciously think of themselves as a community. This position is commonplace in the contemporary humanities and may be summarized as follows:

A culture penetrates its individual members mentally (so that they possess a certain mind-set), physically (so that they possess certain basic bodily dispositions), and socially (so that they relate to one another in certain characteristic ways). This penetration produces in them their distinctive capacities and characteristics. In this holistic way identity is a function of enculturation... Our culture and society shape our personal and social identities by enabling us and constraining us, by selecting, mediating, and preventing certain sorts of activity and outcomes (Fay 1996, 55, 68).

No matter how important psychological characteristics may be for human identity, it is clear that human and psychological identities are not identical concepts. It is culture that is most important for human identity, even for the psychological identity of an individual. However, the term cultural identity does not apply only to the individual human being; rather it is a *collective identity* or—one of its types. Any collective identity, including national identity, also encompasses non-psychological characteristics such as political, linguistic, territorial, physical etc. But, again, cultural identity is clearly not an ethnic phenomenon, though every nation has its own cultural identity. Cultural identity is a chance for trans-nationality; it is a trans-ethnic phenomenon. While there is no national identity without cultural identity, we may speak of cultural identity not only in relation to national identity but also in relation to any social group or even individual identity. Cultural identity is the inner content of any collective or individual identity.

So what then, if anything at all, is cultural identity? It should be admitted that the term is not very well defined (in comparison with the term “culture”). Etienne Balibar (1995, 174) has offered one of the most explicit definitions:

Cultural identity appears as a collection of traits, of objective structures (as such spontaneously thought of in the dimension of the collective, the social and the historical) and as a principle or a process of subjectivation (spontaneously thought of in the dimension of “lived experience,” of “conscious” or “unconscious” individuality). Between these poles there would normally be correspondence or reciprocity, following the models of exteriorization and interiorization; but in certain cases there may also be conflict.... Cultural identity is often described as being what expresses the singularity of “groups,” peoples or societies, what forbids conflating them in a uniformity of thought and practice or purely and simply erasing the “borders” that separate them and that translate the at least tendential correlation between linguistic facts, religious facts, facts of kinship, aesthetic facts in the broad sense (for there are styles of life just as there are musical or literary

styles) and political facts. But at the same time cultural identity poses the question of universality or universalization.

By our understanding, cultural identity is a set of *typical* cultural characteristics through which we can identify a social group and/or its members. Where there is culture, there must also be cultural identity and to describe cultural identity is to analyze culture, but cultural identity comprises *only* the most characteristic features of a particular culture, by which it may be quite safely recognized (for instance, impressionism can be recognized according to its style of painting). Thus “cultural identity” represents *a specific cluster of attitudes, habits, traditions, values, interpretations, ways of feeling, thinking and acting which are typical of a certain community and which represent its common product*.⁸ According to this conception, cultural identity answers questions such as: What kind of people are we?⁹ What can be expected of us? What can we contribute?, rather than the traditional question “Who are we?”

Within this conception, two levels in the content of cultural identity may be discerned. First, the “objective”, that is forms of life and behaviour, traditions, habits of mind and heart, action and communication, mentality as discovered and interpreted by sociology, social psychology but mainly by history, cultural studies, ethnology and ethnography, cultural and social anthropology (with respect to Slovakia also “folkloristics”), everyday culture, cults, values, rites and rituals, cultural norms and patterns, stereotypes, etc. Second, the “subjective”, that is self-interpretations and self-images, collective “ideologies” and myths. Self-reflection of my identity is part of that identity, though not necessarily because the way in which I see and define myself may be different from the cultural identity of my community. I may even define myself using vocabulary taken from a culture different from my native one or the one I belong to. This explains that humans are not slaves of their cultures.

The term “identity” often appears to mean exclusion and opposition to any change and difference. However, the opposite is in fact the case. Contemporary conceptions of any kind of human identity involve two important features: *historicity*, which means that our identity is developing and changing; and *plurality*, which means that we have, or can have several identities. Identity does not mean that we remain the same for all time and in all places. Identity is not something given once and once alone. For instance, to speak of contemporary Central European culture or cultural identity is not the same as depicting this cultural

⁸ For a different concept of cultural identity linking it basically with national identity see Mistrík et al. (1999, 86-97).

⁹ For a similar approach without using a term see Rákos (2001). The author writes of *imago morum* (lifestyle) and *imago attributorum* (basic human attributes) which have nothing to do with ethnicity or ethnic identity.

identity in the way that it was a hundred or a thousand years ago. Our cultural identity has not always been the same; it is continuously developing. Stuart Hall (1993, 4) has summarized as follows:

(I)dentities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. ... Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we come from' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself... they arise from the narrativization of the self...

Here is, to some extent the answer to the question of how our cultural identity is formed, outlined. We ourselves create and co-create it. It is neither God nor Nature but we ourselves who make us what we are. It is our *social construction* that can be—and actually is—transformed according to our needs and creative abilities.¹⁰ There is nothing intrinsic or inevitable that cannot be changed in our cultural identity even though such a change is a complex process. Cultural change lies at the most substantial level of human life and we can distinguish (by analogy with Thomas S. Kuhn) periods of *normal culture* along with *transformational periods of cultural paradigms*.

European and Central-European cultural identity

Following the approach outlined above, it should be clear that the concepts of “European” and “Central European” cultural identities require to be re-conceptualized. No wonder that there are intellectuals—and particularly philosophers amongst them—who are still quite sceptical about these concepts. For instance, if we take identity as unity, we might argue together with the contemporary Czech philosopher Břetislav Horyna (2001, 20-21), that Europe is without any kind of fixed and unambiguous identity: geographical, religious and even cultural. He regards the attempt to produce one single idea of Europe as futile and useless, despite that fact that several versions that seek to proffer a definition of European cultural identity have been proposed. Thus, according to many, the

¹⁰ Other proponents of the idea of social construction of cultural identity could include the pragmatists, G. H. Mead, J. Dewey and R. Rorty as well as F. Nietzsche, L. Wittgenstein, M. Foucault and other postmodernists.

foundation of Europe is Christianity and this foundation is universal (see Lobkowicz 2001, 102-117; Zimmermann 1996, 54-57). With almost the same urgency and universality, philosophers, notably from the phenomenological camp, have argued that Europe naturally means logos and rationality (and consequently a search for truth, philosophy and science) (see Husserl 1970, Brunschvicg 2000, Patočka 1999). But many would also agree with Patočka's approach that attempts to unite both Christianity and rationality as the basic spiritual essence of Europe when he writes that

Europe as Europe has emerged from this motif, the care of the soul... Europe, in particular, western Europe but also the other one, has originated from the care of the soul... (Patočka 1999, 210, 227).

Others, however, might wish to follow Ortega Y Gasset's (1993, 17) insight that "European culture is a constant creation" and join those who in the end reject the monistic idea of Europe and develop a *pluralistic* one. Within this framework it is clearly possible to distinguish several Europes. Horyna (2001), drawing substantially on the work of Joseph Fontana (2001), describes in detail four Europes: ancient, Christian, modern and after-the-end-of-history Europe. Otakar A. Funda (2000) has also identified four sources of European cultural identity: Judaism, Greek and Roman antiquity, Christianity and secularized humanism, which have given us the six most important pillars for our life and behaviour: responsibility, humanity, freedom, rationality, exactness and tolerance. Europe is all of this and more: values and ideas such as human rights and the rule of law, solidarity, peace and the dignity of mankind, equality and social justice etc.¹¹ Europe is both a mixture and a whole at the same time, and it is not the product of any one exclusive culture, neither Judaic nor Christian, nor even Greek or Roman. According to the Czech politician Petr Pithart (1998, 45-53), Europe's main characteristic is its cultural diversity and multiplicity; Europe is a part of the world that has always been in search of its own place, identity, frontiers and self-interpretations, and this should be regarded as a positive value.

Europe is not identical to Western Europe either, though the tradition of this identification has been so strong that today some express it in a very radical way: the precondition of the rebirth of Europe is the dissolution of the West (Horyna 2001, 199). The common theme is that Western European culture, under heavy scrutiny during the 20th century, has been held responsible for the crisis not only of itself but also of the whole globe. Thus it is as if this culture contained the germ of self-destruction within itself. The sociocultural identity on which Europe was built has, again, been annihilated (Funda 2000). While Nietzsche was the prophet of this

¹¹ See the so-called charter of European identity: http://www.europa-web.de/europa/02wwwwww/203chart/chart_gb.htm.

crisis and foresaw the era of nihilism, it was Husserl who attempted to define it. Many others, such as the Frankfurt School and later Heidegger with his writings on technology, pointed to some substantial features of this crisis, such as instrumental rationality, the humanism of the Enlightenment and the science/technology alliance. According to Patočka (1992, 15-16), as late as 1945 we entered into the era of science/technology which he calls “the late European era”, in which we lost or abandoned something substantial in the sphere of our intellectual and spiritual culture and there is little evidence or hope that we might regain it. Another relevant explanation of the way in which Europe has damaged its own fate has been given by Peter Sloterdijk (1996). He argues that the nature of Europe as a sociopolitical and cultural phenomenon is found in the power game it has been playing since its inception, and this game is simply the transition of the empire. Once it was the Roman Empire, and this became the model for all other substantial European nations such as the German, French, English and Spanish nations, but also to some extent for the Austrian, Italian and of course Russian nations. This is the “Roman way” of Europe, as explained in the influential work of the French philosopher Rémy Brague (1994). But after 1945 the centre of this game moved outside Europe and the leading player has become the USA. This however, Sloterdijk thinks, is the challenge for Europe: to rethink its identity and its place in the world, now that it has been marginalized. The only chance is to replace the “Roman Empire” approach with a very different one, a “non-empire” conception, and that will be the point at which Europe may resuscitate itself.

Let us now move closer towards the issue of *Central Europe*. What is Central Europe? Does it exist and what is its identity? What should or could this identity be? And who are we Central Europeans? What type of people are we? Are we different, are we special? Why and in what way?

Historically, Central Europe was formed in the 11th century and consisted of four cultures: German, Roman, Byzantine and Slav (see Dvorník 1974). But the idea of Central Europe as a specific sociocultural region originated within the domain of politics after Napoleon’s definitive defeat in 1814.¹² This part of Europe is, no doubt, different and specific, in the sense that some other regions of Europe, such as the Baltic, the Balkans, Scandinavia are. In this respect we can employ the term *regional identities* for each of these European parts. These are multi-national trans-border regions and their cultural identities are larger than their national identities. Thus Central European cultural identity can be seen as a type of a regional identity whose culture is mixed in essence. It is neither Western nor Eastern European culture. It is a combination of both. For instance, in comparison to Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe has not been so secularized and has

¹² Geographically the area of Central Europe could range from Germany to Estonia and Croatia to Poland, but here I have in mind a Central Europe consisting of five countries: Austria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic (see Matoušek 1998, 527-532.)

to some extent remained a pre-Enlightenment Europe, one that is pre-modern, and therefore more Christianized than rationalized.¹³

However, what may be regarded as most distinctive about this region is the mixture of Slavic and non-Slavic elements. Thus the very heart of the culture of Central Europe, even to a greater extent than Europe as a whole, is its multicultural and multi-ethnic character. The differences between the Slavic and non-Slavic elements are sometimes quite substantial, nonetheless this is exactly what forms Central-European cultural identity, which is the amalgam of them, unlike Western European culture that is exclusively non-Slavic and the Eastern European culture that is predominantly Slavic. Just as in the past, the integrating factor in Central Europe was the Austrian (Austro-Hungarian) Empire, in the 20th century it was the Czecho-Slovak State. Therefore some authors suggest that we should speak of a common Czecho-Slovakness, with its ancient Great Moravian roots (from 8th and 9th centuries), as the proper version of Central-European identity (Kučerová 1996).

There has always been a dispute over who we Central Europeans, particularly Slovaks (or Czechs) are and where we belong, to the West or to the East, but the idea of a unique and separate Central Europe is the solution. This suggests that our cultural identity is authentic and should be taken as such, and not be confused with the former or the latter ones. The uniqueness of our Central European cultural identity consists precisely in this amalgam of Western and Eastern, Slavic and non-Slavic elements, of course, in a different measure in Slovaks than in Czechs, in Austrians than in Poles. So it is evident that Central Europeans are Europeans, though they retain their uniqueness, which should be taken into account (Kučerová 1996, Milén 1998, Polakovič 1994).

There have also always been disputes about the role Central Europe plays or should play in relation to the West and East: is it a border or bridge between them? The answer, of course, depends more on a political than philosophical point of view, however, there have been some philosophical interpretations of it, just as there have been of the whole debate of Central Europe.¹⁴ Václav Bělohradský (1991, 39-125) stresses the cultural diversity, but also the universality of Central European culture, the latter imposed by the impersonal Austrian bureaucratic state power. He describes this civilization as “ultra-legalistic” in the sense that the authorities, clerks in uniforms and their decrees dictated all walks of life in the old “C. K.” regime. Famous Viennese and Prague intellectuals such as Wittgenstein, Freud, Musil, Broch, Kafka, Hašek and later Kundera perceived this to be the manifestation of the absurdity of European rationality by which they anticipated its

¹³ For agriculture as one of the roots of Central-European culture see Frolec (1992). This also applies to Slovakia according to Slavkovský (2000, 24-28).

¹⁴ On the political aspects see the work of Hungarian intellectual István Bibó (1996) on the troubles of small states in this part of Europe, though he still calls it Eastern Europe, which was common during the Cold War period.

total later 20th century crisis. The result is the pervasive grotesqueness, banality, kitsch and anecdote that is found in the picture of Central-European life. The Hungarian political scientist Endre Kiss (1994, 31-37) also considers what he calls the “triumph of rationality in Central Europe,” but from a more positive point of view; he argues that the specific Central-European type of modern rationality is one of its greatest achievements, manifesting itself in the science and philosophy of the Vienna Circle, Freud’s psychoanalysis and Hayek’s liberal economy; he denies the totalitarian character of this type of rationality and considers it *pluralistic*.

One of the most interesting philosophical discussions of the debate concerning Central Europe can be found in the work of Czech philosopher Karel Kosík (1993). Partly in opposition to Patočka, he thinks of the nature of Central Europe not in terms of a spiritual Platonist phenomenon but of inquiry, openness and uncertainty. According to Kosík, Central Europe is a historical space which itself is a problem or an open question; the space of a quarrel. There are German and Russian attitudes towards this space, but only the interpretation given by Central-Europeans themselves can provide an accurate understanding of what Central Europe actually is. It has its own philosophy in the conception of man, world, and their relationship together. This philosophy was laid out even in the 19th century by František Palacký (1977, 333-390) and it is a modern federalist and liberal conception in which its author argued for the collaboration of nations as equal partners. One of the main inner tendencies in this part of Europe is the attempt to transgress particularity and intolerance, however, Kosík is well aware also of the “smallness,” with its arrogance to the powerless and subservience to the power of the Central-European Babbitt. Central Europe has always had to fight its own fussiness, vigilance, mediocrity, and even certain undemocratic traits due to its bureaucratic “Austrianness”.

Central-European culture is very complex its structure can be compared to that of a labyrinth.¹⁵ This has a great deal to do with its own provincialism. It contains many paradoxes generated by everything you can find elsewhere, West or East, but not in such a combination.

The Case of Slovakia and its Cultural Identity

If there is such a thing as “Englishness”¹⁶, what then constitutes “Slovakness” as a cultural phenomenon? How do we Slovaks feel, think and behave? Is there something unique, authentic about our culture? Have we created something

¹⁵ As Josef Kroutvor (1990, 54) described it in his essay on Central Europe.

¹⁶ Speaking of English culture, Thomas S. Eliot (1962) listed Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the Twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin-table, the dartboard, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar. See also Easthope (1999), Scruton (2000).

original, or have we just been adopting external influences, but adopting them in what way? Based on our approach as outlined above, to answer these questions is not to deal with the so-called national psychology or national character but with the nature of Slovak culture which constitutes our cultural identity. This is identical to the question of what type of people we, the Slovaks, are.

Slovak culture could be defined as the Slavic variation of a Central-European culture. It is clearly and naturally multicultural¹⁷ and confessional (Baník 2000). The latter is also a striking feature of the older tradition of philosophy in Slovakia up to 1945, while in the last fifty years its character has become divided between ideology and scientism (Münz 1999, 18-20).

If we take, in our search for the Slovak cultural identity, a brief look at its Slavic roots, we might mention František Palacký (1798-1876), the Czech historian and leader of the national movement, the liberal proponent of the idea of the federalization of the Habsburg Empire, who in his attempt to define “the enduring Slavic character” spoke of features such as:

- Slavic liberalism and democratism,
- pacifism and anarchism,
- disunity and conservatism,
- egalitarianism,
- communitarianism,
- cultural syncretism,
- religiousness and spirituality.

Palacký's contemporary and friend, the Slovak intellectual Pavol Jozef Šafárik (1795-1861) analyzed the old Slavic culture and related areas such as Slavic mythology in his main work *The Slavic Antiquities* (1837). He found that it exhibited very similar features to Indian mythology (particularly in fairy-tales), and selected the following characteristics of Slavic ethnic culture:

- simplicity,
- innocence,
- enchantment in folklore
- virginity, fervency and warmth of feeling

by all of which he wished to demonstrate the poetic nature of the “Slavic spirit”, its romanticism, transcendentalism and emotionality.¹⁸

It should be clear that, again, it was Herder, who was the intellectual hero for these Central-European intellectuals and who described the Slavic character in sharp contraposition to his native German culture. According to Herder, Slavs had

¹⁷ As Peter Zajac (1996, 172-177) writes in his essay “Multikulturalita ako základ kultúrnej identity Slovenska” (Multiculturality as a Basis of Cultural Identity of Slovakia).

¹⁸ For romanticism which some have regarded as a constant feature of Slovak culture and identity see Chorváth (1997, 242-261).

never been nations of warriors but only peacefully followed others. They were peasants and pastors attached to the land; skilled craftsmen and merchants, jolly and music-loving people; moderate but also sheepish who would rather escape to unoccupied territories than defend their already occupied ones; very vulnerable against external enemies, and in this sense very Christian because they also prepared for self-sacrifice in a very hospitable way; not attacking and colonizing, not desiring power over others; people of a very gentle character; resigned, depressed, careless, pessimistic and not able to fight directly but rather in a tortuous manner (see Herder 1968, Book XVI). The features of our culture and cultural identity have naturally found their expression in what has traditionally been labeled as our “mentality”, quite famously known as our “dove character” (Kompánek 1921, 13-27). This used to be regarded ambiguously: both as our virtue as well as our weakness, depending on the context. But self-reflection in general is quite a tricky phenomenon of our culture. Traditionally we have presented our identity mostly by defending ourselves against, and thus comparing ourselves with other nations, such as the Hungarians, Czechs, Russians, Germans, and not through direct self-reflection. This may explain why our self-image is still more apologetic than self-critical. As a result our attitude towards our culture—and in particular to its components, such as traditions—is still imbued with passiveness, piety, uncreativity and even tabuization in the sense of a saying that is almost a social norm: “It is not fair to discuss traditions—just to obey them.” This relationship to past traditions has always been a very subtle issue in our culture and only a few have been so ingeniously forthright and courageous as Alexander Matuška (1910-1975), the outstanding Slovak literary and cultural critic, who in 1931 wrote:

Many have already raised the question by what we Slovaks are hindered, why are we the way we are... To look critically at the dance of those before us...—is what we are not able and not willing because we would break the tradition... What is our all-national sanctissimum...? Our past... We would not have been able to live without the past, without a “history”... We live in the past, for the past... (Matuška 1997, 120-122).

Thus people encultured with such an attitude are not very flexible to newly introduced values and multicultural processes: they generally either reject or uncritically absorb them. As Matuška observed:

It is very typical that this faith has not brought anything positive, to creation... Our faith in the past is dangerously similar to our faith in god, to our Christianity. That means: to lay hands down!... Faith as an abdication to work, that is our faith in god and in the past... History, historiography, a story is first of all a model, a guide to imitation, if you like... The past is here to be judged, and get rid of that which hinders us (ibid.).

In summary and with reference to the specificities of Slovak culture, we can outline some of the main characteristics and values that are typical of our cultural identity:

- piety and peacefulness rather than aggressiveness,
- emotionality rather than rationality,
- closeness rather than openness,
- conservatism rather than progressivism,
- an orientation to the past rather than the future,
- a strategy to preserve tradition and the old rather than to embrace the new,
- stability rather than change,
- necessity rather than contingency,
- security rather than risk,
- community rather than individuality,
- communitarianism rather than liberalism,
- family rather than government,
- contemplation rather than action,
- pessimism rather than optimism,
- Catholicism rather than Protestantism,
- Cartesianism rather than Darwinism.

Pre-industrial culture became entrenched in Slovakia during the centuries of feudalism and it is one of the main causes of our closeness and conservatism. This agrarian culture was very local and stable. Based on the traditional big-family and patriarchal communities, it was also very static. Generational transmission of values was very strong and authoritative. It was a "valley" and "village" culture with the effect that once something had been done for the first time, it might only be changed later with great difficulty; as if the past had to be repeated indefinitely. But the people did not feel it as something negative, rather vice versa, this has created a sort of a harmony between the individual and family, between culture and nature. This character of Slovak cultural identity only began changing as a result of the process of industrialization, partly after 1918 and especially after 1948.

The contemporary Slovak cultural identity may still be regarded as insufficiently modern: perhaps we have never been modern here. Thus it is Christianity rather than Enlightenment rationality that is the main pillar of our cultural identity with all of its consequences. Therefore, "post-modernity" means to us a return to our older sources, a move forwards by moving backwards to the restoration of some of the most powerful of our pre-modern traditions. We are Europeans because we are Christians, but we are not Westerners because we are not rationalists or individualists either.

The Future of Central-European Cultural Identity: Restoration, Transition or Reconstruction?

One fact seems to be evident: whatever our cultural identity in Central Europe (or in Slovakia for that matter) is and has been, the upheaval of 1989 has been so

great and momentous, that it could not have stayed the same. In fact, it has already started changing and for at least the following three main reasons:

- Fall of the old regime in 1989
- European integration process
- Globalization

But in which direction have we started changing? One direction may be stated outright: Westernization (or even Americanization) while the other, usually the opposite of it, is quite difficult to define: perhaps we could term it “Slavonicization”? Is this really what we need? Perhaps “Europeanization” is the right term, lying somewhere between these two. But, what does it mean? A move toward a post-national Europe? It is still controversial and it seems that nations are here to stay. Even a unified Europe will become a Europe of nations and ethnic groups and not of one Pan-European Nation.

In any case what should be taken into account is that cultural change is one of the most difficult of all the social transformations. The overall socio-cultural situation in Central Europe after the radical political turn in 1989 is still, after more than a decade, quite complex. Some sociologists even speak of *anomie*s, which people in these countries have to face (Ondrejko 2000). While all have felt a need to know who they are, who they were and who they shall become, new developments after 1989 have brought a rupture, a discontinuity which has meant not merely a challenge for people to re-think their identity but also uncertainty; what will come next? While the former group of people might have had illusions about the easy nature of a transition back to that which they had been for a long time before, for the latter group it has caused trouble because they had no idea as to whom they should now become. This situation has created two basic attitudes in people: 1. nationalistic and closed, which is the wish above all to preserve all that is “ours” and regard integration and globalization as a loss of identity and something endangering. And 2. universalistic and open, which seeks to form and re-form, to create a new and open identity. Both attitudes contrast with each other in their basic understanding of identity: while the former thinks that identity is and always must be something fixed and immutable, the latter thinks of identity as a phenomenon open to change and transition and to so-called “alien” influences.

To our understanding there are three main options before us when considering the issue of Central-European cultural identity:

1. *Restoration*, which means that the task is simply to search for the specific nature of Central-Europe in the past, and to renovate and resuscitate this for a new era. However, thus it may happen that we shall try to bring to life something which is largely obsolete and the result will be a nonsense.
2. *Transition*, which means that the task is to move to something completely different, something that has never been common to this region, e. g. Westernization or Slavonicization. However, in this way we might try to implement something completely alien, and the result will be permanent internal conflict.

3. *Reconstruction*, which means that the task is both to preserve what had been strong and lively in the past but also to create something new and adequate for the contemporary condition. Thus the result will be not only the renewal of that which is worthy and at home here but also the building of something that has a chance to survive in the new context for the future.

In reality the situation is that both the proponents of restoration and the proponents of transition took the lead and began to quarrel amongst themselves. It has been natural for us to think that our Central-European identity, which was almost lost and in fact disappeared between 1939-89, will now be regained and restored. However, the controversy continues even within this camp because it is not clear as to which tradition we should return: Christian rather than Enlightenment? On the other hand it has also been common to call for a transition as if it were possible to throw away in its entirety our old identity overnight and replace it with a completely new one: postmodern, postindustrial, postcommunist but also postcapitalist, ecological, humanist, and the like.

While what we need is to work on reconstruction, which is the most difficult but also the most interesting and hopeful option, reconstruction is precisely a reconstruction and therefore demands creativity in all spheres of life, including politics. If there is a self-myth that Central-Europeans are very creative people, then we have a chance to prove it now. Let us take as an example the issue of our political culture and identity. In the background, Slavic societies and cultures are traditionally collectivist and one might think that the legacy of the former communist regime has strengthened this idea. Nothing seems like that. The situation is rather ambiguous: on the one hand, individual achievement is almost always preferred but on the other hand, the individual's feeling of insecurity is still quite strong. Community is both hated and loved at the same time. Individuals wish to be free and independent but they also search for protection and security in a collectivity of one kind or another. Notwithstanding, if we want to transform and modernize our society, it is precisely individualism and liberalism that should be incorporated into our culture. The question is what kind of individualism and liberalism? Lockean or Deweyan? Libertarian or social-democratic?

A promising candidate for such a type of liberalism is *pragmatist liberalism*. With its creative and participative democracy (and with such instruments as creative intelligence) it appears to be one of the best and most hopeful option for making human lives in this part of Europe more dynamic as well as stable at the same time. But we have to re-create it in a new context, not just copy it.

Conclusion

Today it is clear that we live in a multicultural world in which cultural pluralism is hardly a disputed fact. There, where there is identity, there is also difference, and

different cultures come into contact with one another. But differences need not necessarily mean conflict. Two types of reaction to otherness and difference are possible: 1. conflict (culture wars, cultural imperialism, isolationism), 2. Cooperation (which is inter-cultural and refers to mutual understanding, respect, and perhaps the creation of something new). Therefore, multiculturalism is not sufficient in itself; what is also crucial is *inter-culturalism*, that is, the possibility of mutual tolerance, respect, recognition, communication, exchange and collaboration between various cultures. An awareness and knowledge of identity changes is the key to a better mutual communication and understanding.

The building of a united Europe and of a European cultural identity is based on respect for cultural diversity and cultural pluralism (languages, religions, ways of life), which help to make 'European culture' a mosaic of cultures. Contemporary European integration has to shuttle both the Scylla of nationalist isolationism and the Charybda of supernationalist centralism. Some are afraid of losing their cultural identity (and therefore decisively fight for it), and some tend to ignore it (and therefore decisively fight against it). Both dangers may create conflicts, and even substantial ones. The only healthy basis for European integration seems to be a mutual respect for all cultural identities in Europe because in European tradition, the following standpoint is quite natural: I shall collaborate with you if you will respect me. The global European identity has some of its common features but it has many local and regional cultural identities that should not be destroyed nor even sacrificed in the name of a single unified European identity. Diversity, plurality and multiculturalism belong to our common European legacy.

Central Europe today is far from being a central concern for Europe. It is no longer in "the middle of Europe", neither is it simply between Western and Eastern Europe. It has lost its context and stands on the edge between the integrated West and the chaotic East, insecure, unstable and pressed by the necessity to quickly reevaluate and reaffirm its values and development options.

Central Europe has always been an open project that involves confronting universality and particularity, while recognizing the outstanding cultural diversity and the necessity to standardize and harmonize some values, respecting the will of particular cultures to self-identify themselves and the need to develop better cultural communication and cooperation.¹⁹

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¹⁹ The article has been written within the research project VEGA, No 2/3142/23, Slovak Republic.

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