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Mitteleuropa and the European Heritage

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Abstract
The political significance of Mitteleuropa has grown in that much of it is now within the EU. Mitteleuropa is a discourse; it is not just a semantic term or a label to refer to a geopolitical region in which power and culture are intertwined. Although people may identify with it, it is not primarily a term of identity but a cultural mode of interpretation. It can be called, along with other concepts of Europe, a conflicting field of interpretation. The concept reflects a civilizational context based on imperial models of modernity and cosmopolitan cultural resonances. Europe is an ongoing cultural battleground and the idea of Mitteleuropa is a reminder of a shift to the margins and the emergence of a multiperspectival Europe along with new notions of geopolitical space and historical-time consciousness.

Key words
■ Central Europe ■ cosmopolitanism ■ European identity ■ modernity ■ Slovenia

What is Mitteleuropa? Is it a cultural identity or geopolitical model of modernity? This question has been asked many times since the late nineteenth century and the answers that have been found have reflected the historical experience of the age. The notion of Mitteleuropa today is inseparably linked with different and contested readings of history and with different concepts of Europe. We are more inclined nowadays to think of Europe in terms of a plurality of identities and political projects, as the notions of an Old Europe, a New Europe, a Core Europe suggest (Levy et al., 2005). To these notions of Europe we can add, amongst many others, Mitteleuropa. But such concepts of Europe also reflect different models of modernity as well as different values and concepts of the European heritage. In this article we argue that these concepts of Europe are neither stable identities nor clear-cut geopolitical entities but conflicting modes of interpretation in which power and culture are intertwined. Our aim is to look at the constellation of elements that define the current discourse of Mitteleuropa in order to assess its relevance for the present day.

Mitteleuropa, like the term Europe itself, has always been a contested term and had two main uses in the past one hundred years or so. On the one hand, it was largely an Austrian cultural discourse. Although it had pan-German origins in
the early twentieth century, it had become a backward-looking evocation of Habsburg Central Europe, with a strong focus on Vienna as opposed to Germany. It was based on a notion of ‘Old Europe’, a concept that has now acquired a different meaning. On the other side, it had a distinct political as opposed to a cultural meaning and which it acquired in those countries especially in Hungary and what was then Czechoslovakia. This civil society discourse can be referred to in terms of ‘anti-politics’, to cite George Konrád (1984) for whom Mittel-
europa was allied to civil society while communism was allied to the state. Interestingly, this left-wing use of the term had an earlier use in Austro-Marxism. It is possible to detect in this a shift from a Right to a Left discourse, which roughly corresponded to a shift from a cultural to a political kind of self-understanding. From a pan-Germanic discourse (after 1945) it had become an Austrian one in the 1980s and a civil society discourse. The major reference points of these discourses of Mitteleuropa are Naumann’s (1915) work, Magris’s evocation of the Danube and Konrád’s and Kundera’s civil society conceptions. In these narratives it had a strong Western European orientation, suggesting Catholicism and democracy; its reference points were the cultural centres of the Dual monarchy: Prague, Bratislava, Vienna, Budapest and Trieste. After 1989, a competition arose as to who belonged to it: as a geopolitical terms it was to exclude those further east.

Today – with the passing of the Cold War era – these somewhat conflicting discourses of Mitteleuropa have lost their relevance and new ones have arisen. The present context is a different one since the entire region is now incorporated into the European Union. With this comes a certain obsolence of the civil society discourse and a return of the cultural question of Mitteleuropa and its place in the European heritage. Yet, while it is easy to dismiss it as an ideology with questionable sentimental overtones inherited from the past, it still does have some relevance. In the context of multi-ethnic countries where the nation-state developed late and with problematical results, it pointed to an alternative to nationalism; moreover it had cosmopolitan connotations that are not irrelevant to new expressions of European identity. We would like to suggest that what we have here is Mitteleuropa as a conflicting field of interpretations.

The Shifting Maps of Europe

The making of the ‘new Europe’ is based on the project of rooting Europe as far back as possible but the historical and geographical maps of the ancestry have been intermeshed with various mythologies and clashing narratives of the descent (Delanty, 1995; Hay, 1957; Mastnak, 2000, 2003). This holds true already in the case of the Carolingian Empire and the desire to inflect this medieval formation with modern political and cultural meanings. Thus, the Carolingian inclusion of the lands within that ‘entity which was held together by the Christian faith’ (Ullman, quoted in Hay, 1957: 52) today is seen as an early anticipation of the political programme of European unification, whereby Charlemagne has often been called the father of the ‘European idea’. Because the medieval term the
‘Kingdom of Europe’ was used interchangeably with the ‘Kingdom of the Holy Church’, the origin of Europe is also projected alongside the history of the Roman Catholic Church (Mastnak, 2000: 10). Both visions say more about the political ambitions, desires and tensions of the present than reflect the actual past. Whereas the religious character of Charlemagne’s ‘Kingdom of Europe’ cannot be disputed, it is highly questionable whether it can be seen as already having a political meaning. The Kingdom of Europe marked the territories conquered by Charlemagne, who never used the term but accepted its usage, from Francia to Laba in the north, to Hungary in the east, and Istria and Dalmatia in the south (see Mastnak 2000: 13). However, the meaning of his *Imperium Romanum* was identical to *Imperium Christianum*, defined in contrast to the Eastern Roman Empire of the Constantinople’s patriarch. The thesis that the Carolingian Europe was the birthplace of the ‘self-awareness of the Latin-German world’ is therefore historically anachronistic. The point is that the political meaning of Europe is essentially post-Carolingian, emerging only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Although there is evidence that the Europe of Charlemagne carried some emotional connotations without which later political meanings would be hard to imagine, the extent of the territory which had already shrunk in the rule of his son Louis the Pious receded to become but a ‘memorial community’ (Mastnak, 2000: 13). In the middle of the ninth century, it was transformed through poems and memoirs into an imaginary land of remembrance of the greatness of the emperor; by the eleventh century, it was an exhausted concept; in the thirteenth century, it no longer carried any emotional charge: ‘Europe, one must conclude, is a word devoid of sentiment, Christendom a word with profound emotional overtones’ (Hay, 1957: 58).

As a geographical term, the Carolingian Europe creates no less discomfort. Until the invention of *portolano*, maps were uncertain sources of information. This fact is largely neglected in various historical atlases and textbooks which show medieval and early modern European lands with an exactness and orderliness acquired not long ago (Hay, 1968). In the Middle Ages, people happily lived without maps. Moreover, the ‘existence of a vernacular noun “Christian”, meaning no more (and no less) than “person” gives a vivid indication that religion rather than race or government or geography formed the common basis of all groups in western society’ (Hay, 1957: 56). It was only with the emergence of the nation-state that people became locked within borders and forced to adopt enclosures of the modern imagined communities as their fate (Pieterse, 2004: 34). Last but not least, the borders have shifted back and forth (Delanty, 1996b). In Liutprand’s history of the kings and princes of Europe from the tenth century, Europe shrunk to Italy, eastern Francia and Byzantium. King Alfred (871–899) conflated the borders of Europe with Germania whereas the borders close to today’s geographic Europe marked larger Europe, *ealle Europe*. When Otto’s restoration of the empire in the tenth century put Rome back on the map as the centre, the context was not ‘Europe’ but the ‘Roman world’ (Mastnak, 2000: 21).

The centre of Europe has been no less debatable. When Avignon became the residence of the pope, a fierce exchange developed between the defenders of the
new domicile and those who saw it as an outrageous choice. In his ‘Letter to
Posteriority’, Francesco Petrarca wrote of the Roman Pontiff’s ‘shameful exile’
and of the Pope who ‘Had he lived but a little longer, he would certainly have
learned how I regarded his retreat.’ Indeed, in absence of any clear justification
for Avignon, the argument resorted to geographic reasoning. The head of the
Church should reside in the centre of Christendom, it was argued, which, with
the departure of Greece, moved to Marseilles. The debate echoes the present-day
migrations of the centre of the EU. The unification process has made the geo-
graphic centre a moving target: prior to enlargement in 2004, the geographic
centre of the EU was the Belgian village of Viroinval. In May 2004, it moved
to the town of Kleinmaischeid; when Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007,
the centre moved east to the vicinity of Frankfurt. Defining the centre of Europe
runs into even greater obstacles, caused mainly by the ‘problem’ of the eastern
border. If Russia west of the Urals falls within European cultural and geographic
space (and many would agree with refreshing the memory of Peter the Great’s
Europeanization of the Russian Empire), then the centre lies somewhere in the
Ukraine (Delanty, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). Cartography plays a role in the construc-
tion of the historical narratives of the origins of Europe and inventions of its past;
by creating discrepancies between geography and politics, it also maps out the
order of power and privileges.

Whereas the coordinates of the geographic centre of at least the EU can be
accurately determined, the perception of the European borders is rather blurred.
This, as already mentioned, holds true especially in regards to the eastern border,
a perpetual site of discomfort for the West. For the most part of the modern
history of Europe, Europe proper was coterminous with the West. In order to
consolidate the western hemisphere of the continent, an East was needed which
helped to contain both geo-political and cultural imaginaries of difference and
belonging. The invention of Russia as the East had already crystallized as part of
the Enlightenment project (Wolff 1994). As Wolff states, the map which darkened
the lands behind the iron curtain is much older than Churchill’s address to ‘these
Eastern states of Europe’. What made the Churchill’s oratorical image so powerful
was the fact that ‘demarcation of a boundary line “from Stettin in the Baltic to
Trieste in the Adriatic” followed a line that was drawn and invested with meaning
over two centuries’ (Wolff, 1994: 4). This is not only relevant when decompos-
ing the mythologies of Europe which rely on an essentialist notion of a shared
’sense of cultural unity’ (Hay, 1957: 120) but fails to account for how inventing
the Others was constitutive of forging this cultural belonging; it bears relevance
for the cartographies of cultural and political belonging in the present. It certainly,
as will be discussed later, plays a role in the formulation of the post-Cold War
Mitteleuropa as a terrain of refuge for eastern states from both political (commu-
nist) and cultural containment within the shadow of easternness (Wolff, 1994:
3). That this curse has a history longer that the Cold War era is reflected in the
failed referenda on EU Constitution, which among the new coming post-
socialist states has been perceived, as one Slovenian daily put it, as the ‘rejection
of the East’.
In addition to the eastern border, there are internal divides. Thomas Masaryk in *Das neue Europa* (1918) envisioned Central Europe composed of small nations (the Lapps, the Finns in the north to the Balkan peoples and the Greeks in the south). Refuting Naumann’s idea of Central Europe ruled by Germany (the vision already condemned by German Social Democrat Karl Kautsky in 1915 and 1916), Masaryk’s Central Europe included neither Germany nor Austria. The term Zwischeneuropa (first coined by geographer Albrecht Penck at the turn of the century) re-emerged between the world wars to avoid the earlier political connotations of Mitteleuropa as a form of German domination. After the Second World War, Forst de Battaglia refreshed the concept to delineate the ‘in between’ area as belonging to both East and West, containing the Orient and the Occident (Mikkeli, 1998: 180–2). In the 1983 discussion of the three historical regions of Europe, the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs wrote of the fate of Eastern Europe caught between two regions, the East and the West and pinpointed the hybrid character of the third region caught in between: culturally, it fell within the West, but failing to develop civil society, Central Europe was closer to the East. ‘The hybrid variant produced by the region between the two extremes was the domus Austriae’ (Szűcs, 1988: 325).

Any discussion about Mitteleuropa today must take into account the fact that the term Western Europe – or the West – can no longer be used with the same self-confidence that it was used in the 1980s. Europe is not the West. A new ‘post-western’ kind of Europe is coming into play (Delanty, 2003). In this the margins are becoming more important with a general shift to the east. This entails a general decline of the West as the overarching reference point for Europe and it is no longer possible to define European civilization in terms of a unitary notion of modern western civilization. While Mitteleuropa was shaped by tensions within a largely western tradition – Latin Christianity, the Habsburg and German tradition – East-Central Europe was shaped by wider civilizational tensions, the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. Included in this is the Orthodox-Latin Christian divide. So it was not just a product of multi-national but also in a sense multi-civilizational backgrounds.

Mitteleuropa is a testimony to the irrelevance of the East vs West polarity, since it includes by definition both west and east. It lacks clear borders, like Europe itself. Many interpretations of Mitteleuropa are too simple, such as Gellner’s dichotomous account (Gellner, 1998). Given the imperial background – as opposed to the nation-state tradition – and communist dominance, it is particularly suitable to the current European context of a postnational order. It reflects a very European kind of cosmopolitanism. The fact that it is contested makes it all the more relevant since Europe is to a large degree constructed in debates about it. The field of modernity itself is vividly present in the different civilizational patterns. It is a reminder that much of Europe was shaped by multi-ethnic territorial empires, which were not homogeneous nation-states.
Austro-nostalgia and the Revival of the Idea of Mitteleuropa

Given the shifting maps and blurring frontiers, it can be argued that Europe is not one, but indeed that there are at least two, if not many. As it holds true for Europe, so there is also more than one Mitteleuropa. The borders of Mitteleuropa are no less imprecise constructs: the pan-Germanic view draws the lands of Mitteleuropa between Lothring and Russia; Poles, Czechs and Hungarians would opt for including the small nations between Germany and Russia. Some expand the territory to include Scandinavia, the Italian and Balkan peninsulas, whereas others would go for a closer match with the borders of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire (Strassoldo, 1991: 188). Masaryk, as we have seen above, foresaw neither Germany nor Austria within the embrace of Central Europe. The meanings projected through screen memories of this territory are historically, culturally and ideologically different: an escape route from socialism (the former Eastern bloc), defence against Americanism (blossoming in Western Europe), a way of furthering Europeanization (the former NDR). The outburst of Austro-nostalgia in Friuli-Venezia Guilia in the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, emerged as a reaction to a ‘forcibly imposed exclusivist national identity’ and a ‘regionalist claim opposed to the postulate of a homogenous nation-state’ (Baskar, 2004: 50; see also Strassoldo, 1991).

In addition to contested meanings and margins, the idea of Mitteleuropa is tainted with negative connotations, as mentioned earlier, pinned to imperial appetites of Naumann’s Germany and rejuvenated by Hitler’s Reich. Strassoldo argues that we should dispel this discredited German notion and restore the multi-national, Habsburg-Viennese past (Strassoldo, 1991: 192). Indeed, in recent decades, the Habsburg legacy has generated many forms of nostalgia and fantastic derivations of the Austro-Hungarian spirit. The revisiting of the Austrian Empire is in ‘tune with a general Zeitgeist’ which in the past decade has distilled in the form of manifold cultural and political invocations of past empires (Baskar, 2004: 49). According to Baskar, for instance, speaking in territorial terms of the Habsburg Empire, Austro-nostalgia coincides with Yugo-nostalgia. Both forms share the ‘nostalgia for the vast imperial space that has shrunk’ and, in the case of post-socialist revivals, also unveil the repressed imperial core of Tito’s Yugoslavia.

Although one has to be wary of idealizations and selective appropriations involved in Austro-nostalgia, if divorced from its mythological dimensions, the Habsburg legacy may add a fresh angle to the debate of identity and cultural belonging in the post-national era. The core of the success of its Middle European system was in its promotion of cultural cosmopolitanism expressed through a supranational idea (Magris, 2001: 206). Austrian national identity did not exist; instead, the ethno-national contours were shaped by Italians, Germans, Slavs, Hungarians, Ruthenians; in addition, Austrians invented the Bosniaks. Moreover, the allure of the empire and its cultural formation for many lay in the fact it allowed the simultaneous articulation of ethno-national and supranational identities, a model which seems to be an especially appealing formula of the multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual co-existence and was based on
nourishing, not suppressing, cultural diversity. ‘I am a very typical mix of old Austria-Hungary: at once Magyar, Croatian, German and Czech: my country is Hungary, my mother tongue is German,’ Odon von Horvath, the author of Tales from the Vienna Woods, wrote in 1930 (quoted in Kumar, 1992: 443). Growing up in the typical Austrian family of diverse ethnic backgrounds, Italian sociologist Strassoldo recounts his experience: ‘Our world was not called “Mitteleuropa”. But it didn’t carry any other name either, because each name points to a definition and the drawing of the border, it includes “homeland” and its “holy borders”’ (Strassoldo, 1991: 173). The resistance to naming the homeland meant resistance to being enclosed within ethnic boundaries of a linguistically, culturally, religiously, economically, spiritually homogeneous nation-state that would demand exclusive loyalty. In addition to ‘national dresses, everybody proudly wore festive supranational one,’ Magris writes (2001: 185). More importantly, this sense of double belonging was spread among intellectuals, the aristocracy and ordinary people who were ‘devoted to the political power of the imperial state while proudly protecting their linguistic and cultural identity’ (Magris, 2001: 193).

In addition, Austrian patriotism seemed to be especially masterfully managing the question of the border. The case of the eastern border is indicative of the closely paid attention to cultural particularities and diversity. The ‘Asian character’ of the area along the Russian border, so strange and foreign to the German culture, turned the eastern lands into typically Habsburg provinces by which to sustain the ethno-cultural supranational ideal. Moreover, with the helping of the alien cultural iconography of the eastern lands, the myth of the ‘zwischen Europa’ gained in power. In those foreign lands, Austria as the mediator between West and East found its ideal home (Magris, 2001: 184).

**Mitteleuropa Post-1989**

How did these past legacies figure in the renewed debate on Mitteleuropa around 1989? For the intellectuals of Eastern and Central Europe, the debate emerging on the eve of the events of 1989 was more than just taking part in the academic fashion (expressed in the intellectual and institutional interest in regional studies) that at the time was spreading globally. In Slovenia, for instance, like their colleagues in the Eastern Bloc (Havel, Konrád, Milosz, Kundera), for instance, writers, historians and philosophers were posing existential questions such as ‘the awareness has come true that people of this area are endangered in the core of their life being’ (Bučar, 1991: 64). Milan Kundera’s essay was influential in this regard. In ‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’,2 his Mitteleuropa is projected not only as the line of defence of the West but also as a zone of internal exile (Kumar, 1992: 440). The view was taken up by the discourse of the ‘return to Europe’ articulated in the 1989 revolutions which, in contrast to the Western narrative of the end of history, were seen by its actors as the ‘rebirth of history’. It also re-iterates the narrative put forward by Konrad and others that Mitteleuropa was a safe haven of Europe which, with its turn to consumerist individualism and
totalitarian collectivism in both West and East, respectively, was disappearing. Kundera depicts the cultural centres of Vienna, Prague, and Warsaw. Vibrating with the creative explosions of figures like Freud, Mahler, Bartok, Gombrowicz and Kafka, Musil and Broch, this was hardly a geographic coincidence, he writes, but rather a testimony of the shared past which fuelled a new cultural configuration. How is it possible, then, Kundera asks, that nobody has noticed the disappearance of Mitteleuropa? That the West showed so little interest in the disappearance of the ‘cultural home of Europe’ (i.e. Mitteleuropa) was a sorrowful mirror image of the fact that the West no longer perceived its unity as cultural unity. The real tragedy, Kundera concluded in his by now famous essay, therefore was the tragedy of the West which did not understand, could no longer understand how one could be willing to die for it (Kundera, 1984).

The influence of Kundera’s essay is indisputable; moreover, it should be read in the context of its historical moment and appreciated for its implicit condemnation of the ignorance of the West which exposed its full dimensions during the war in ex-Yugoslavia. However, with its cartoonish depiction of the noble European and a blunt construction of the Russian Other which permeate throughout the essay, Kundera gave both a fresh push and presented a barrier to the imagining of post-1989 Europe in cosmopolitan alternatives to nationalism and politics of difference. This latter came true in the essay written by Kundera and published by Le Monde in defence of Slovenia that was being attacked by the Yugoslav army when he stated: ‘I hear voices who in relation to the Slovenes speak of the “danger of Balkanization”. But what does Slovenia have to do with the Balkans? This is a Western country.’ Reminding the reader of the proximity of Slovenia to Trieste and its Middle European past, Kundera refers to the country’s ‘desire for the West, desire for Europe’ (Kundera, 1991: lx–lxi). Ignoring the fact that the Balkans was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and that the Bosniaks were incorporated by the Austrian Orientalist discourse as the ‘good Orientals’ (Gingrich, 1998), his reasoning provided points of departure which were taken up in the Slovene discourse on Mitteleuropa and, developed to extremes, continue to hinder the cosmopolitan conceptions of (post-socialist) European identity.

In the context of the post-1989 Slovenia, several themes emerged which situated the country within the cultural milieu of Mitteleuropa but also gave the notion of Mitteleuropa a new interpretative framing. The first theme evolved around the vision of Mitteleuropa as the conglomerate of the sovereign nations. This view was already offered by Kundera who wrote of the nineteenth-century commitment to the preservation of the ‘authentic life of the nation’ against the threat of assimilation. However, the nineteenth-century appropriation was reconstructed in a way which did not launch the ideal of the nation-state (as the rule of the law and protector of basic human rights) but instead introduced ‘ethnic homogenization and hostility towards all who were different’ (Mastnak, 2003: 211). The possible shared future of the Middle European nations, the editor of the Slovene volume Central Europe wrote in 1991, is an opportunity that each ‘nation compares with close neighbours in the area, from which it comes and to which it is historically pinned’ (Vodopivec, 1991: 13; emphasis added). In a
similar tone, after reviewing the pros and cons for reviving the idea of *Mitteleuropa*, a Slovene historian concluded his essay that the only future is the ‘Europe of the nations’ (Grafenauer, 1991: 26). How remote might be the idea of forging national loyalty to the Middle Europeans of the early twentieth century who smirked at even adopting the name of Middle Europeans as too confining, is a point of speculation. More to the point, it relegates to amnesia the reality of the structural diversity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which conceived of cultural pluralism beyond territorial containments. On the contrary, its multicultural map unfolded through a ‘group of territories in which different ethnic groups occupied the same place’ (Kumar, 1992: 444, emphasis added). This multicultural sharing of the space was first defined after 1918 as a result of progressive ethnic homogenization of the territories once belonging to the empire’s multi-ethnic composition. In the light of global transformation of the relation between space and identity, and with the emergence of new imagined communities on the territories of the nation-states that were ethnically homogenized between the wars and after the Second World War, the resort to nationalist localism creates further tensions which may prove that, after all, the revival of the idea of *Mitteleuropa* at the turn of the century has been but an ‘empty dream’.

Second, the tendency to revive the gloriously nationalistic rather than a multi-culturally dispersed image of the empire blurs the vision of the Middle European identity. Thus, rather than embarking on the question of the successful merger of the particular and diverse cultural fibre within the supranational, *Mitteleuropa* becomes a blank cheque, a guarantee of the noble identity of the nation. Kundera writes, ‘The people of Central Europe are not conquerors’ (1984: 36), a view echoed in Slovene discourse on the eve of seeking independence from the Yugoslav state. ‘Kundera, Konrád and other authors emphasize Mitteleuropean – autochthonous peacefulness, readiness to compromise, civility or cultured behaviour, as far as political changes are concerned,’ wrote Slovene sociologist Dimitrij Rupel, in 1989, who was also foreign minister in several transition governments, and concludes: ‘that in spite of all the reservations, this “character” trait will play role in the transformation of the Slovene nation-state in the not so far away future’ (Rupel, 1991: 97). Since 1991, the myth of Slovene proverbial peacefulness and ‘cultured behaviour’ has been radically decomposing, showing it for what it was: a wishful invention rather than a historical document (Vidmar-Horvat, 2007). Furthermore, with its conspicuous tendency to homogenize the Middle European character, the statement runs counter to the notion of vast imperial spaces conceived mentally and territorially as diverse and free of clear signifiers. Implicitly, it also draws the boundaries of us vs. them, of peaceful vs. militant communities which at once idealize ‘us’ and stigmatize the ‘other.’

Third, in the 1989 discourse on *Mitteleuropa*, the Russian Other is the readily available source with which to construct the exclusionary difference. Nothing is more foreign to the Middle European passion for difference than Russia, Kundera states, while conflating Soviet communism with Russia. In Kundera’s essay, Russia emerges as the other civilization, moreover, the other civilization imagined as alien to the point that, for a Pole like Joseph Conrad, even the slightest remark
of his ‘Slav soul’ becomes unbearable. In contrast to Kundera, in Slovene writing, the
construct of the Other is moved somehow closer to the Habsburg legacy. Russia is both merged within and divorced from the Soviet regime. The latter is
projected in stark opposition to the European ‘spiritual and cultural values’ (Bučar, 1991: 56). With real socialism, Mitteleuropa lost its soul (Bučar, 1991:
62). Therefore, the main task is to ‘return to the values which formed the life of
this area’ (Bučar, 1991: 64).

Whereas Soviet state socialism is represented in clear terms of the systematic
destruction of Middle European cultural identity and its value system, Russia
receives different attention. Russia, too, is European, as writer and essayist Marjan
Rožanc does a powerful U-turn, arguing that with its collectivist tendency, Russia
is the sublimated Europe. In Russia, Rožanc writes:

In the country with no political tradition of autonomous citizen, which is the crucial
cultural and political component of Western and Mitteleuropa, the collectivist tendency
of the Western Europe came true: the nation and the nation-state united into a shared
power, which remains the unfulfilled German dream up to the present and a nostalgic
memory in England and France. In Russia, the spirit of communism which was born
in Western Europe as the antidote to the disintegrative will of the fully affirmed indi-
vidual was realized. In this regard Russia is Europe, in a sense even more European
than Europe itself. (1991: 79)

Slovene discourse on Mitteleuropa shares the post-socialist theme of the ‘long revol-
ution against Yalta’ (Kumar, 1992: 446) but, through rediscovering Dostoyevsky
and themes of individualism and freedom, it also liberates Russia of its exclusive
communist totalitarian signifier. In this regard, it acknowledges the proximity
and interrelatedness of the spiritual and political histories of West and East. ‘The
conflict between “capitalism” and “communism” in the twentieth century,’
Kumar writes, ‘is of the same kind.’ Both sides in the conflict involve questions
of inhumanity and inefficiency use different terms but they ‘are borrowing from
the same common European store’ (Kumar, 1992: 458). With the admission of
Russia into the imagined community of Europe, however, other frontiers emerge.

The West has come to realize slowly that Eastern Europe, which like Western Europe
belongs to Christian civilization, is the defence against other civilizations. Eastern
Europe in the meantime probably also noticed that its true rival is not the West but
the Far East. (Hribar, 1991: 39)

Mitteleuropa is not a state but a culture or a fate, Kundera writes: ‘Its borders are
imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation’
(1984: 35). As borders are mainly mental constructs (Strassoldo, 1991), they can
both alienate and unite, create distances or transversal alignments. In post-
socialist discourse, Mitteleuropa is both: it figures as an imaginary site of negoti-
ation of identity and as an ideological instrument of xenophobic forces of ethnic
nationalism which find in the idea of Mitteleuropa a legitimation for their
cultural politics of exclusion (Delanty, 1996a: 94).
**Mitteleuropa as the Cultural Project of the EU?**

*Mitteleuropa* is a fiction comprised of dream (Kumar), a way of life and life experience (Strassoldo), an outlook on the world (Konrad), a culture and a fate (Kundera), hopeless nostalgia (Hobsbawm). It is an occidentalized fantasy which, with its omissions and erasures, allows a ‘retrospective reading of the imaginary programmes as images of real possibilities’ (Hribar, 1991: 32). There are several mytho-poetic and mytho-historic elements which hide the past realities and the daily experiences of the Austrians who were scarcely more enthusiastic about the Habsburg Empire than its present-day apologists. This may be true especially for the groups on the margins who did not look to Vienna but to London and Paris but also for the poets and writers who, after the collapse of the empire in 1918, gladly turned to the Western cultural centres (Delanty, 1996a: 99). The most cherished diversity of the Habsburg Empire was borne on the privilege of mobility. This was granted only to the elites. As Magris writes, when the majority of population was subject to feudalism, it was possible to entertain the ‘luxury of a great degree of indifference as well as fantasy regarding the territorial borders’ (2001: 189). This can be compared with the present-day global tourist’s opposition to globalization whose lament resides in the desire to keep the cultures of his distant destinations frozen in history and as diverse and different from his own world as possible (Tomlinson, 2000: 308; see also Bauman, 1996). Whereas social and cultural experiences of both travellers historically vary, structurally, their luxurious position demystifies the discourse of ‘cultural diversity’ as but the project of the privileged. In this regard, the Austro-Hungarian model may attract attention because, dressed in a colonial mantle, it safely fuels postcolonial imaginaries of identity, mobility and difference without disturbing relations of power.

Second, the myth of the Habsburg Empire conceals the fact that the supranational structure was sustained by the dominance of the more powerful nations over the others, Germans, Magyars and Jews in particular (Kumar, 1992: 442). The 1989 articulation of the myth of the ‘Europe of the nations’ may be seen as a return of the repressed refreshed in the nationalist form of the post-socialist states. The rise of nationalism has been debated in connection with this uneven sharing in the imperial form of multiculturalism (Magris, 2001: 213) and, appropriated to the current EU distribution of power, certainly can be taken as a historical lesson not to be repeated.

Finally, the revival of the idea of *Mitteleuropa* by intellectuals in post-socialist countries has played a role in the cultural distancing from the communist regime and the Eastern Bloc. In the Habsburg imaginary, Russia provided vital cultural and territorial sites for the consolidation of the Austrian identity conceived as unity-in-diversity. For the post-1989 narratives of the Central and Eastern Europe, it has been essential to alienate imperial affinity for Russia and to turn its territorial distance into a marker of civilizational otherness. As controversial as this othering of Russia may seem, it is close to the imaginary which held together the Habsburg universe. Namely, celebrating the Habsburg legacy has frequently obscured the fact that in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the borders
were sites of fantasies which helped consolidate the centre in different ways. The ‘frontier orientalism’ as the structure of inscribing difference and distance has been termed by Gingrich, maintained two kinds of the Oriental, the good (mostly Bosniaks, the colonized Muslim) and the bad (the Turk) whose mutual presence helped to enforce the cultural repertoire for constructing identity and difference. ‘Overcoming the Bad Muslim is a precondition to the glorious achievement not only for modernity but of identity, while relying on a controlled Good Muslim in the struggle against other threats is necessary to maintain it: this is the meta-narrative of frontier orientalism’ (Gingrich, 1998: 119). Enmeshed in political rhetoric and mass education and unique for its folk articulation prior to the academic one, frontier orientalism is a distinct feature of the Middle European cultural space and, enmeshed in the global disseminations of a ‘new Orientalism’ (Delanty, 1996a) can be seen as an elaboration of a former variant.

The idea of *Mitteleuropa* is primarily a ‘contrast concept. Its structure and content are determined to a significant extent by what it opposes or what opposes it, what it excludes and what seeks to exclude it’ (Kumar, 1992: 442). Does reviving the idea of *Mitteleuropa*, then, make any sense? In view of the contemporary displacement of concepts of Europe, how anachronistic is even the attempt to draw its map? Moreover, as many critics argue, the perpetual historical re-discoveries of ‘Central Europe’ should be seen in terms of a continuous identity-forming project stretching for over 200 years and whose aim is to distance the region from both East and West and inflict on it a separate meaning (Mikkeli, 1998: 185). Can the idea of *Mitteleuropa* at all be considered the formula for the EU? Moreover, if the European Union can be seen as the political programme, can the Austro-Hungarian legacy be considered as supplanting it with cultural politics? What are the caveats that, if unaddressed, may hinder the prospects of its successful transplantation?

*Mitteleuropa*, as we have argued, is a contested term. Two major meanings assigned to it in the past derive from the clashing Western and Central/Eastern uses, denoting, on the one hand, the Habsburg legacy and the civil society (anti-politics), on the other. After 1989, a third usage emerged in which *Mitteleuropa* becomes a terrain of cultural struggle to westernize the Eastern/Central post-socialist states. As a ticket ‘back to the history’, in this latest sense, *Mitteleuropa* serves as an imaginary site on which new post-socialist identities are being negotiated. This, as discussed above, has involved drawing new borders and opening up new frontiers, not as sites of multi-ethnic interaction and multicultural contact nor as meeting spaces of cosmopolitanism, but as variants of frontier orientalism.

Yet, as a mode of interpretation, *Mitteleuropa* suggests a way to re-address the question of inter-cultural and inter-ethnic tolerance and co-existence in Europe reframed by the contexts of the influx of new ethnic groups and triggered by the global migration of labour. With its ambiguous and flexible notions of the frontier, it also contests the notion of mobility in which the border becomes the meeting point rather than a line of demarcation (Strassoldo). Most importantly, if freed from its own obsession with forging a western-oriented European identity, the idea of *Mitteleuropa* can prove a working tool to re-fashion identities in post-national global contexts.
Conclusion

We would not argue, as Hobsbawn (1991) does, for instance, that the Habsburg sense of the term should be rejected. The term is open to new definitions, both political and cultural. It is interesting to look at the term as a discourse rather than just a conceptual term and to explore the ways in which its meaning changes as a result of political and cultural change. In this sense Mitteleuropa is a cultural discourse of historical time consciousness but has political effects.

Mitteleuropa first arose as a cultural Old Europe that had shifted from an association with the Habsburg heritage to a left-wing position based on resistance to communism. Today in the post-1989 context the idea of Mitteleuropa is in tension with the idea of Old Europe since this has now shifted to what has been called Core or Western Europe. In other words, Mitteleuropa became not part of Old Europe but a New Europe and its new identity today is being forged against this meaning. In any case, Old Europe – France and Germany – no longer quite covers Mitteleuropa and the now somewhat redundant notion of an all-inclusive New Europe does not quite resonate with the ethos of Mitteleuropa. What we have here is a cultural contradiction which has arisen out of a displacement of concepts of Europe. But this displacement works in several ways.

The term Mitteleuropa now fits uncomfortably with the term ‘East-Central Europe’ or ‘Central and East Europe’ (Arnason, 2005). It is not clear if the latter is in competition with it. East-Central Europe includes much of what is excluded in a narrow use of the term Mitteleuropa, namely societies further to the east. It has arisen due to the changed relations between cores and peripheries that has come with the enlargement of the EU. It is impossible to consider Mitteleuropa without reference to these new concepts.

The political significance of Mitteleuropa has grown in that these countries are now members of the EU. Their accession to the EU and the more general shift to the east have marginalized the Euro-Mediterranean, which was on the agenda in the 1990s. This is a displacement of a different kind, one that may result in the marginalization of the southern dimension to the identity of Europe. Any consideration of Mitteleuropa cannot neglect the wider political context and the displacement of other related ideas.

Mitteleuropa is a discourse – not just a semantic term or a label to refer to a geopolitical region – in which power and culture are interwined. Although people may identify with it, it is not primarily a term of identity but a cultural mode of interpretation. Perhaps it can be called, along with other concepts of Europe, a conflicting field of interpretation.

To sum up, the concept reflects an intra-European civilizational heritage based on imperial models of modernity and cosmopolitan cultural resonances. Europe is an ongoing cultural battleground and the idea of Mitteleuropa is a reminder of a shift to the margins and the emergence of a multi-perspectival Europe along with new notions of geopolitical space and historical-time consciousness.
Notes

1 Portolani were the maps meant for sailors and travellers and were used from the early thirteenth century onwards. With the invention of the compass, they were perfected in the fourteenth century to include detailed parallels of latitude and increasingly reflected a growing interest for the political arena. Thus the maps begun to include symbols of political power – coat of arms, red dots marking Christian towns and black indicating the towns of the infidels, crescent for Muslim lands. In contrast, earlier Mappae mundi never distinguished between Christian Europe and Muslim Asia and Africa. As Hay comments, the first maps which identified Europe with Christianity emerged when Christendom as the active principle was already in decline!

2 In various authors, the term Mitteleuropa is used interchangeably with Central Europe. The centres of both, however, vary. Central Europe's centre is Berlin whereas Mitteleuropa is polincentric: Vienna, Prague, Trieste, Sarajevo, all pass as regional capitals although Vienna holds prime location. In this article Mitteleuropa is used to delineate a cultural configuration as much as a geographic area.

References


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