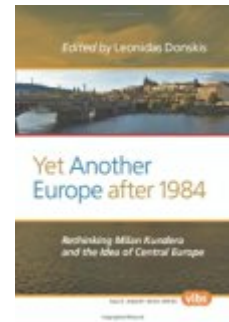


Leonidas Donskis. *Yet Another Europe after 1984: Rethinking Milan Kundera and the Idea of Central Europe*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. x + 223 pp. \$65.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-420-3543-0.

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Published on H-SAE (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik



Translating Central Europe and the Anthropology of Europe

At the apex of the Cold War's political division of Europe, Czech writer Milan Kundera sparked fresh discussion of the continent's cultural-historical schisms with a 1984 essay, widely known as "The Tragedy of Central Europe." [1] To the extent that countries governed by forms of Soviet-style socialism in roughly the "Eastern" half of the continent did not all share values, worldviews, and cultural practices, Kundera argued that a piece of "the West" had in fact been "kidnapped" by the less European traditions of Russia. Kundera called into question a unified notion of "Slavic culture" that some had taken as coterminous with an "East," pleading for a reconsideration of how other features, such as "small nations," a significant Jewish cultural legacy, and different aesthetic sensibilities in the arts and literature, formed a region neither "East" nor fully "West." If Western Europeans turned a blind eye to the destruction of Central European traditions, Kundera warned, they were not merely losing cultural heritage that had contributed to European modernity; they were losing a critical "early warning system" for social and political trends that might soon overtake them.

Anthropologists did not participate in the international discussion that ensued about Europe's boundaries and about, as Kundera put it in one version of the essay, culture "bowing out" under Communist rule. [2] The anthropology of Europe at that time was generally split between the concerns of those who worked in "Western Europe" and those who worked in the Communist "East," but neither group took up issues of urban intellec-

tuals, with the notable exception of Katherine Verdery's *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (1992). Thus, an argument of Kundera's such as that of the "early warning system" might seem strange to anthropologists of particularly Western Europe, even as scholars of literature, politics, and film might affirm the keen warnings that Franz Kafka, Václav Havel, and other luminaries from the region have offered about the dark side of "European" modernity.

Yet Another Europe after 1984 revisits Kundera's essay from the perspectives of thirteen scholars from different disciplines working on issues of Central and Eastern European society and culture. None are anthropologists, and probably only one—sociologist Zygmunt Bauman—is known to anthropologists beyond scholars of the region in question. However, the issues that this edited volume raises of identifying a "Central Europe" after the collapse of Communist rule beg the attention of all anthropologists who work on or in Europe as a whole.

How does thinking about Europe's regions—and particularly a Central Europe—contribute to the anthropology of Europe, especially insofar as Bauman's question, "where should we look for and where can we find *Europe*" (p. 1, emphasis in original), is an abiding one for the discipline? To those readers who think that the question of Europe's boundaries is not an ongoing central one for the field, I would point to the current strong level of interest among anthropologists in multiculturalism and immigra-

tion in Western Europe. Anthropologists of Eastern Europe (including many who work within the category of “postsocialist studies”) are all too aware of the ongoing cultural politics of borders between West and East that can be discerned in Western European discourses about migrants from the East (such as “Polish plumbers” and the region’s Roma) as well as a long-running desire of “Easterners” to “rejoin Europe” (symbolized by a European Union anchored in the “West”). So if an East exists that is not quite the West and the West at times stands for the whole of Europe, revisiting the discussion about Central Europe might disrupt helpfully a political binary cutting through the anthropology of the continent.

Yet Another Europe after 1984 consists of thirteen revised papers from a seminar held in Kaunas, Lithuania, in October 2010. In his foreword, editor Leonidas Donskis, a scholar and a member of European Parliament for Lithuania, advises that the contributions were consciously written in an essayistic style in part to “do justice to a great Central European thinker and writer [Kundera] by trying to emulate the lightness, irony, and elegance with which he treats provocative issues” (p. ix). Any unevenness readers find may have to do not only with the contributors’ relative comfort writing in an essayistic style but also with the customs of their various national academic and intellectual audiences. Four of the thirteen contributors hold academic positions in the Baltic countries, and four from “Višegrad” countries, which include Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Intriguingly, although the patron saint of this volume, Kundera, is Czech, no Czech scholars have contributed to this volume. And the fact that nearly one-third of the contributors are tied to a state on the geographical perimeter of most conversations about “Central Europe” (Lithuania) is perhaps indicative of the ongoing desperate and nostalgic qualities of the current conversation. The remaining contributors come from notionally Central states, Slovenia and Italy, and from further afield—the United Kingdom and Australia.

Some of the authors hew more closely to themes that Kundera laid out in his essay while others take it as a point from which to depart into variations on modernity, migration, memory, and discourse. To illustrate the former move, György Schöpflin explores Kundera’s claim of Central Europe’s “incompleteness” in terms of how the region’s “repeated experience” is of “externally derived and constructed transformations” as well as historical markedness (p. 20). Donskis observes that “when meeting Western Europeans, Eastern Europeans often have no choice but to present their personal life stories in the con-

text of a lesson in political and cultural history” (p. 44). Paired motifs of hybridity and translation are also emphasized. Krzysztof Czyżewski finds that recent cultural figures from the region who have achieved pan-European prominence—such as philosopher Martin Buber and artist Paul Celan—have tended to “embrace ... the impossible collision of difference in which they found themselves.” He laments the more recent domination of “a language of confrontation and self-defense,” instead of a “lexicon that could once again make the Central European ethos communicable” (p. 178).

Samuel Abrahám’s work straddles scholarship and the practical tasks of crafting institutions, forums, and networks through which small post-Communist states have been rearticulating their national identities. Writing from the vantage point of Slovakia, Abrahám’s genealogy of “Central Europe” late in the volume is a reality check on the concept’s slipperiness and its limits. He argues that the concept itself is not as valuable as are the figures whose work it may have inspired, including the Austrian Karl Krauss, the Hungarian Endre Ady, and the Pole Witold Gombrowicz. Abrahám writes that (Western) liberal democracy needs the “daring sincerity and courage of the individuals who founded the virtual and real Central Europe” (p. 201).

A certain “geopolitics of provinciality” infuses the book, but it would be a mistake here to gloss “provincial” as antimodern or retrograde.^[3] In the spirit of recent anthropologies of postsocialism, these contributors are pointing out the need for more ethnographies that salvage the “unrealized hopes and opportunities” one finds in the geopolitical shadows of Western modernity.^[4] The essays in this volume do not pretend to be ethnographies, but their overarching concern with a kind of cultural production touches on the multiculturalism, pluralism, and civic engagement that Western Europe has claimed as the outcome of its unique heritage. The writers collected here trouble the assumption (from which many anthropologists are not exempted) that Western Europe itself provides *the* hidden vantage point for problematizing “Europe’s” modernity. The scholarly erasure of Europe’s Center and East since the Cold War has not gone away. To be fair, some of the questions raised in anthropological considerations of Western-Europe-as-Europe, such as how Muslim values integrate with European secular and Christian societies, have been largely ignored by scholars studying Europe’s postsocialist East, not to speak of its Center (though see Kristen R. Ghodsee’s *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria* [2009] as a recent ex-

ception). What other contradictions and problems within European modernity might the anthropology of Europe's Center and East still reveal? The promise of postsocialism as a critical analytic resonates with Kundera's notion (highlighted by several contributors to *Yet Another Europe*) of Central Europe as an "early warning system" for the West. Unfortunately, nearly twenty-five years after the collapse of Communist rule in the region, this argument seems to have had little influence on how scholars who claim to write about Europe as a whole think of their subject. The challenge for anthropologists of Europe's East, and its Center, is to discover new lines of inquiry that *do* generate broader discussions incorporating Europe's internal as well as external borders. It might help them to engage more with the region's traditions of intellectual self-study, such as those modeled in this book.

To the extent that an anthropology of Europe fails to recognize and engage comprehensively with Europe's geopolitical fragments, it fails to model European modernity in its fullest complexity and incorporate the range of modernities that one can find across the continent's history. From the vantage point of this edited volume and anthropologists of postsocialist Europe, the "tragedy of Central Europe" today remains the untranslatability for peoples and scholars in the West of historical experiences that not only compose part of their heritage but also leave

open questions of European futures.

Notes

[1]. Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *New York Review of Books* 31, no. 7 (1984): 33-38. An alternative title of several variations of the essay (including in French and Swedish) employed the phrase "A Kidnapped West" (Milan Kundera, "A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out," *Granta* 11 [1984]: 95-118). For an excellent analysis that situates the different versions of the essay, see Charles Sabatos, "Shifting Contexts: The Boundaries of Milan Kundera's Central Europe," in *Contexts, Subtexts, and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Brian James Baer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011), 19-31.

[2]. Kundera, "A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out."

[3]. Neringa Klumbyte, "Europe and Its Fragments: Europeanization, Nationalism, and the Geopolitics of Provinciality in Lithuania," *Slavic Review* 70 (2011): 844-872.

[4]. Gerald W. Creed, *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 8.

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Citation: Jonathan L. Larson. Review of Donskis, Leonidas, *Yet Another Europe after 1984: Rethinking Milan Kundera and the Idea of Central Europe*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

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