



Marcin Moskalewicz, Wojciech Przybylski, eds.. *Understanding Central Europe*. BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies Series. New York: Routledge, 2018. 610 pp. \$215.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-79159-5.

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Understanding Central Europe is an impressive collection of sixty-eight essays by scholars from the region that aims to contribute to the “understanding” of the complex geographical region of Central Europe. However, as the editors, Marcin Moskalewicz and Wojciech Przybylski, themselves admit, this aim is very ambitious, and “the list of topics presented in this book is hardly conclusive” (p. 21). Most of the entries have a discursive, essayistic form; they represent various patterns of reflection and different academic, national, or even ideological backgrounds of their authors. In their introductory essay, “Making Sense of Central Europe,” Moskalewicz and Przybylski argue that “Central Europe” is a vague and complex term that is far from being homogenous. Central Europe “represents a particular intellectual identity that is intertwined with its geographical location.” Referring to Milan Kundera’s remark that Central Europe represents “part of the cultural West which has been politically hijacked by the East,” the editors argue for the ambiguous position of this region (p. 1). According to the editors, the aim of this book is to review “the most important clusters of ideas that underpin general political concepts presently at work in public debates in the region in an accessible and non-ideological manner” (p. 21). They, however, also see

this book as a “political action in itself” with practical consequences that benefit the regional actors as well as “those to whom Central Europe is still an unknown creature” (pp. 22, 21).

The book consists of fifteen parts commenting on the following issues: the definition of the geographical center of Europe and the conceptual ambiguity of the term “East” also in the form of monuments, which define the center of Europe; samizdat literature; hierarchical power relations in Europe; Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—V4) geopolitics and cooperation in relation to power; Max Isidor Bodenheimer’s idea of the multi-ethnic Eastern European confederation under German protection; Feliks Koneczny’s theory of civilizations; liberalism and nationalism; civil society as the exchange “currency” before 1989; participatory democracy and lustration as reconciliation with the past; the impact of the information and communication technologies; the Ukrainian crisis; forced sterilization in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s; eugenics in historical context in Poland and Hungary; the Slovak healthcare system; contemporary art and vocabularies of artistic activism; self-colonization and transcultural identity; and other important topics.

The volume introduces many inspiring and challenging essays that shed light on various political, economic, cultural, or social issues in Europe. For example, Oksana Forostyna's essay, "Too Many Actors Reshape the Plot," talks about the Ukrainian revolution, also known as "Euromaidan," and makes a point about the Ukrainian middle class being the most motivated and committed group on Maidan, the location where the protests took place in Kyiv. The reasons behind the revolution, as she sees them, were "the oppressed identities, the gap between poor and rich, and the disappointing developments in the foreign policy," but most important it was "personal safety and justice, especially for entrepreneurs and small and medium businesses." Forostyna claims that the Ukrainian tax system puts "everyone who was in charge of paying taxes at risk." She explains that while employees are formally taxpayers, they are not responsible for their fiscal discipline, but rather their employers are. "The problem is that most employees neither know what the real expenses are, not [*sic*] are responsible for their contributions to either their future or the future of the community" (p. 356). Forostyna thereby argues that this system reinforces paternalism and discourages citizen activism. Hence, her main argument is that we find ourselves in "an age of insecurity" where "social groups we used to perceive as different now have common interests" (p. 357).

Another important essay in the book is "Sterilization in the Name of Public Health" by Josef Kuře. Sterilization, especially the sterilization in Czechoslovakia since the 1970s, has not been given enough attention in scholarly circles. The topic is even more pressing and relevant and needs to be critically discussed and acknowledged in the current environment, with the rise of racism and marginalization of the Romani population in Central Europe. Kuře distinguishes two kinds of eugenics: "negative" and "liberal" eugenics. He explains that sterilization was seen as a form of promoting better public health "through the Marxist

state doctrine of the 'common good'—for which the individual (with his or her autonomy) has simply to be sacrificed, for the better future of the society" (p. 481). Hence, sterilization was seen as a social good and an expression of scientific progress. However, in the 1970s, the eugenics introduced in Czechoslovakia was not liberal and voluntary but rather a policy that allowed the sterilization of Roma women in exchange for money, which, as Kuře argues, was "a form of abuse of vulnerable people, usually with lower social status, who in succumbing to the temptation of money, sought to support their families financially by undergoing sterilization." This issue, however, has not been given enough attention within academia in relation to social intersectional segregation, feminism, ethics, and so on. On the contrary, Kuře explains that the issue of sterilization has paradoxically "received more popular attention before 1989 as an object of protest by dissidents of the former regime than it does today as the moral issue in and of itself" (p. 487). The attention paid to such under-evaluated subjects makes Kuře's contribution to this book, among other essays on eugenics in part 13, hugely relevant.

And the last example from the book I want to pay particular attention to is the piece by Timea Junghaus, "Roma Contemporary Art—The Language of European De-coloniality." This essay discusses the under-researched realm of Romani art, as well as the issue of racism toward the Romani in contemporary Hungary. Junghaus starts her essay with the 2008 serial-killer attacks on Roma residents and the initiatives that consequently discuss this shame, guilt, and reconsolidation, coming exclusively from the field of contemporary art and culture. It was similarly the case in Slovakia, where in June 2017, the first publication focused on Romani art was published by a publishing company that was devoted to forms of contemporary art, rather than by any Roma association or ethnologically oriented research.[1] Many Romani artists and intellectuals apply postcolo-

nial theoretical frameworks for understanding the situation of European Roma, and Junghaus does similarly here. She claims that metaphorically speaking Central European societies created their own “black.” “We may also see how the Roma body is sexualized and feminized—similarly to the ‘black body’—in European modernity” (p. 579). While the term “Roma contemporary art” is problematic as it perpetuates white racism and prejudices toward the other, Roma art serves as a tool for searching “for new humanity” and “the search for social liberation from all power organized as inequality, exploitation and domination” (p. 580). Junghaus pays particular attention to the Hungarian Roma woman artist Omara, who she refers to as “the ‘queen’ of Central European Critical Whiteness” (p. 581). Firstly known as an amateur Roma painter, Omara has become the first Roma artist represented in the Ludwig Collection in Budapest. She has achieved this distinction through her gestures and rituals with the central focus on the subversive power of parody with the theme of objectification of non-Roma. For example, when she is invited to an art event she always asks for a white Mercedes or will not travel otherwise. Junghaus explains that “these are not spontaneous games or theatrical self-expressions—but ritualized productions which are formed and repeated under and by oppression, with the power and prohibition and taboo, ran by the horror of exclusion” (p. 582).

The book opens up many issues and presents a large variety of debates from the region. On the one hand, its wide scope is precisely its strength as it provides a broad overview of the key political and cultural issues present in the region. On the other hand, because its scope is so broad it lacks a clear focus and clarity of its professed main objectives. For example, part 9, “Information Society,” is very relevant and pertinent in relation to the post-Communist environment. Sara Koslinska discusses the startup ecosystem in the V4 region. The essay provides results and an overview of the main challenges with these startup

ecosystems, such as people’s skills, mentality, and business culture. She observes the main obstacles to be the region’s Communist past and the relative youth of the market. Jakub Gradziuk focuses on the application of information and communication technologies in the V4 group. He sees the main challenge being that “a large part of the population is not active online, while supporting the digital education of the current web users as well” (p. 382). Gradziuk uses statistical data from the Eurostat and reports from the V4 groups to support his argument. These two essays provide an important overview of the launch and challenges with new information technologies and internet networks in the post-Communist environment, but they are quite descriptive and the authors miss important points, such as: How do these statistics respond to those communities (the Romani population especially) living in the segregated marginalized neighborhoods in poverty? How do new information technologies use surveillance and censorship? These two essays do not present in-depth analyses of the complexity of the issues related to information technologies.

In his essay, “Nation: Central European Context,” Radosław Zenderowski aims to outline the essential differences in perceived notions of what a nation is between Central and Western Europeans. He argues that Central European states were part of multinational empires, in contrast to modern nation-states in West Europe. Therefore, Zenderowski emphasizes the importance of religion in the process of nation formation with a focus on the church. His argument is based on historical analysis of state creation in the region where the “lack of national state (political) institutions was often affected in the integration of an ethnos around one church” (p. 140). He argues that individual nations of Europe knew their European character not by “the means of political and economic institutions, but by the means of culture, and especially religion.” And he adds, “through the constant readiness to scarify themselves for the good of European civilisation” (p.

141). Therefore, in the eastern part of Europe, Christian religiousness for a long time has been recognized as the most certain assurance certifying belonging to Europe. The strongest point of this essay is a compelling overview of historical state creation in relation to the church; it reads as an analysis of historical examination of the nation-religion relationship in Central Europe, but unfortunately, its author misses a critical assessment of these historically based arguments. For example, “belonging to Europe” has been for a long time based on Christian religiousness, but it has not been questioned or critically analyzed in relation to the current state of the European Union. Similarly, the essay does not address the critical meaning of the term “civilization” and what it means in relation to European colonial history. Zenderowski mentions colonialism only in relation to ingratitude from Western countries when he talks about Eastern European countries protecting European borders with great devotion while Western countries enriched themselves by conquering the colonies. The author unfortunately misses important discourse on nationalism, colonialism, and European cultural and religious dominance. Drawing a parallel to Judith Butler’s argument on the term “civilization,” we can understand it as a “term that works against an expansive conception of the human.” “The term and practice of ‘civilization’ work to produce the human differentially by offering a culturally limited norm of what human is supposed to be.”[2] One can see how this term works against the conception of the human, as there is no single defining feature of the human. And what is worse, based on this differentiation, one is to be decided to be treated humanely or not. How does this essay position those who do not fit into the conception of the European Christian community? The history of violence toward minorities, which did not conform to the laws of the church, is never mentioned. The essay, on the one hand, disregards the negative historical aspects linked to the church in Europe; and on the other hand, it does not critical-

ly assess the problems linked to the perpetuation of “Christian civilization” in Europe. Like Slovenian philosopher Marina Gržinić argues, in relation to European cultural policies and neoliberal capitalism, “it is necessary to distance oneself from the nation state and its bourgeois sensibilities, incapable of referring to their racist histories when they are examined in relation to the imperial colonial pasts of Western European states in the EU. We must focus our analysis on colonialism and contemporary forms of coloniality.”[3]

Overall, the book provides a great collection of essays on a broad scope of subjects including politics, nationalism, democracy, culture, art, and history in the post-Communist region. It provokes questions and triggers debate rather than provides a full comprehensive study of the region. A reader might find that even after reading the book, the term “Central Europe” remains ambiguous in the geographical sense. However, as the authors of the book clearly state, this term has more to do with outlook and a state of mind rather than with a firmly defined geographical region. The editors also claim that the aim of this book is to review the most important clusters of ideas that underpin general political concepts presently at work in public debates in the region. Hence, *Understanding Central Europe* should be seen as a dialogue mediator and enabler rather than a comprehensive and conclusive piece of work on Central Europe. The book introduces several crucial issues related to the region, which have not been given sufficient academic and public attention to this day. The book’s discursive form, despite being far from conclusive, is able to trigger in the reader further interest and reflection on these issues.

Notes

[1]. Emilia Rigova and Nikola Ludlova, “Creative Manual for Contemporary Romani Art,” *Enter*, June 2017, <http://www.divebuki.sk/sk/casopis-enter/enter-kreativno-manualos#.W3vnXGY3a8U>.

[2]. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 91.

[3]. Marina Gržinić, “Biopolitics and Necropolitics in Relation to the Lacanian Four Discourses,” *Symposium: Art and Research Shared Methodologies: Politics and Translation*, Barcelona, September 6-7, 2012, http://www.ub.edu/doctorat_eapa/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Marina.Grzinic_Biopolitics-Necropolitics_Simposio_2012.pdf.

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