The Rediscovery of Central Europe

Tony Judt

What Central Europe means has shifted with shifting borders and rule. Western imagination mapped its cultures with Germany through the first half of this century, and with the Soviet Union more recently. Now as political change sweeps the continent, the West is "rediscovering" the region. No longer the displaced persons of some imaginary landscape, for the present at least, Central Europeans themselves are projecting their cultural geography to the watching world.

Leontes: Where is Bohemia? Speak!

—Act V, Scene ii

Bohemia. A desert country near the sea.

—Stage direction, Act III, Scene iii

From William Shakespeare, A Winter's Tale

In the cultural baggage of the West, Central Europe has long been an optional extra. This is especially so in the case of the English-speaking world, but the French have been little better. For the opinion makers and political leaders from William Shakespeare to Neville Chamber-

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lain, the frontiers of civilization did not extend beyond the territorial aspirations of the more timorous Carolingian monarchs. And what was already a restricted vision in 1938 became positively myopic after 1945.

In large measure this was the consequence of the Soviet conquest of half the European continent. East of Vienna, peoples and lands of which little had been known now disappeared from sight altogether. But in cultural terms, what mattered perhaps even more was the disappearance of Germany, for it was the Germans, and their language, that had served as the vital conduit in Europe between East and West, at once unifying and dividing the identity of the landmass between Russia and the Atlantic.

Until 1945, the term Central Europe had a peculiarly Germanic ring to it, reflecting the hitherto dominant German place in the region. From Metternich, who first developed the theme, to Friedrich Naumann (whose 1915 work Mitteleuropa codified its modern usage), the very concept of an area of Europe called central was parasitic on the problem of German unification. In its mid-nineteenth-century usage (in the work of Friedrich List, for example), Central Europe referred to a broadly conceived economic union based in Prussia and the Austrian lands but extending from Copenhagen to Trieste. So long as the form and territorial extent of a united Germany remained unclear, and with no other nation-states established in the region, the future of Europe’s geographical center could be imagined in many different ways.¹

All such dreams were scotched by Prussia’s defeat of the Austrian army at Sadowa in 1866, the outcome of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, and Bismarck’s establishment of a Prussian-centered empire. Europe’s military and political center of gravity shifted eastward, and the unresolved conflicts of empires and nations moved in concordance, with Central Europe now describing the lands between Germany and the Russian empire, focused on Vienna. Naumann’s own conception reflected this development. His Mitteleuropa still included Germany (the book was published at a moment of close German-Austrian military and diplomatic collaboration, during World War I) but moved the frontiers eastward to the Vistula, proposing Central Europe as a candidate for an economic union that would simultaneously incorporate and resolve the national tensions that had arisen since the establishment of the German Empire to its west.
As a result of the war, however, Naumann's vision was rendered obsolete. The reemergence of Poland, the creation of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, together with the reduction of Austria and Hungary to small states, all combined to give the prewar idea of a unified Central Europe a quite new meaning. In the face of ethnic and national pride and the territorial claims and insecurities of the new countries, Mitteleuropa was at best an anachronistic utopia, at worst a stalking horse for the military and economic hegemony of Germany. Even the term itself had become imprecise. The disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (a truly momentous event in European history) left a huge gap in the conceptual geography of the continent. Of what did Central Europe now consist? What was East, what West in a landmass whose political divisions had been utterly and unrecognizably remade within a single lifetime?

In one important French study of 1931, the countries taken to comprise Central Europe were Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Italy. Such a list ignored the newly established Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (whose capital Vilna is the birthplace of some of today's best-known Central European intellectuals), but more immediately it left out Weimar Germany. This exclusion may well reflect the interwar French wish to forget the very existence of their German neighbor, but it hardly corresponded to the view of many contemporary Germans, for whom the new and vulnerable countries to their southeast were open terrain for dreams of German economic revival, territorial expansion, and geopolitical influence. Nor was such a perspective confined to Germans. Until the military implications of treating Central and Southeastern Europe as Germany's natural backyard became inescapable, Western diplomats and scholars of the interwar generation were not averse to such a future for the region. Many of them saw German domination there as the key to containing the Soviet Union, and most would probably have agreed with the contemporary Hungarian economist Elemér Hantos that the Versailles settlement was radically unstable in that part of the world *(mutatis mutandis*, Western readiness to accept the status quo in modern Central Europe, even at the price of Soviet control there, is a response to similar fears of instability in the area between what had historically been nation-states).
With the defeat of Hitler, all such German-centered perspectives ceased to be credible. Moreover, as a result of Nazism, they also lost their historical legitimacy. And thus, from 1945 until quite recently, “Central Europe” became invisible to the West. Obviously, this proposition taken literally is a trifle tendentious. Politicians and diplomats in the United States, Britain, and France took note of events in the area of Europe that fell under Soviet domination in the years 1945–1949 and watched closely for signs of rebellion, if only as a card to play in the great diplomatic game with the Soviet Union itself. But in the domestic politics of the Western allies, and in the world of the “thinking classes,” the notion of an entity called Central Europe disappeared from consideration. In the Western intellectual and political imagination, reconstructing Europe after 1945 became synonymous with creating economic and diplomatic cohesion among the Western allies and the reconstructed countries of Western Europe. At best, Europe became the dream of Jean Monnet and his followers, a sort of reduced Naumannism, supranational economic union but confined to the beneficiaries of the Marshall Plan and consecrated in the Treaty of Rome. The “lands between” entered into cultural limbo and Russian political tutelage.⁴

There was certainly nothing overdetermined about this process. Western public opinion and Western writers and scholars had a long history of concern about the rest of Europe, dating at least as far back as the outcry over the tsars’ treatment of Polish uprisings in the first half of the nineteenth century. British liberals and their electors had a long and honorable involvement in the revolutions and revolts of the years 1848–1918, and Hungarians, Czechs, Serbs, and Poles had all at some point looked to London or Paris for support and encouragement. The mass emigration from this region to the United States around the turn of the century had produced a small but well-organized electorate in cities like Cleveland, Chicago, and New York, and American support for the creation of independent states in Central and Eastern Europe owed something to their presence. Serbian losses during the First World War and the abandonment of Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938 did not pass unnoticed in the Western press, and the rise of fascism had helped mobilize a generation of Western intellectuals in defense of democracy and political freedoms in East and West alike. Not everyone was shocked into collaboration at the prospect of dying for Danzig.
The disappearance of this part of Europe from the consciousness of the Western intelligentsia after 1945 thus represents an astonishing act of collective cultural amnesia, matched only by the delight with which the other half of the continent was rediscovered in the late 1970s. This rediscovery has itself been accompanied by an embarrassing degree of intellectual hubris, a sense that Central Europe indeed exists only in those moments when Western thinkers happen to imagine it into being. This sort of solipsistic geographical nominalism is rampant, for example, in a speech by Susan Sontag, at the International Writers’ Conference in Lisbon, in May 1988. “Central Europe,” she declared, “was an American [sic] metaphor, an anti-Russian concept to explain that the countries of the Soviet bloc were not appendages of the Soviet Union but some even preceded it . . . . It was a very useful concept for non-Russians.”

The context for such breathtaking ignorance is the peculiar political circumstances of the postwar years. In France, Italy, Britain, and the United States (the countries with which I am concerned in this essay), the only people who consistently spoke of and for the lands from Vienna to Vilna were the political emigrés of the Cold War era. The latter ranged across the political spectrum from embittered social democrats to nostalgic monarchists but were united in their anti-communism. In the decade following the end of the war, this stand rendered them virtually inaudible to the intelligentsia of the Left who dominated public discussion of politics in France and Italy and also exercised a determining influence in literary and academic circles in Britain and (to a lesser extent) the United States. But even writers and thinkers of the political Center and Right were less interested in the fate of the region as such than in the role it played in the strengthening of the Soviet Union as a global power. When exiles from the Eastern bloc spoke or wrote of the enslavement of Poland, the 1948 coup in Prague, the political persecutions, and the popular protests, they certainly got a hearing in right-wing circles and the conservative press. But they deluded themselves (as some of them came to appreciate) if they supposed that their audience cared deeply about the condition of their homelands. For anti-Communist intellectuals, what was happening in Budapest or Prague was just the logical extension of what had already happened years before in Moscow and Kiev. Events in Poland and Romania might further strengthen the case for Western vigilance and military superiority, but eyes remained
firmly fixed on the Kremlin. It was part of the tragedy of the postwar emigrés that they could never fully grasp the marginality to which such geopolitical concern consigned all their efforts to enlighten the free world.

Intellectuals of the Left, on the other hand, sought only to think well of the Soviet Union. Communists and non-Communists alike, they projected onto Stalin and his heirs the Socialist dreams frustrated and unfulfilled in the industrial and American-dominated West. Between the glory attaching to the “victor of Stalingrad” and the heartfelt desire to find in the East the future of a utopian project stalled in the lands of its birth, the Western intellectuals of the postwar years had little time for news from the laboratory in which the experiment was being conducted. That Central and Eastern Europe should be the industrial frontline of Soviet advance so soon after providing the agricultural resource base for Nazi conquest was a matter of small consequence. For the Western Left from 1945 until the early 1960s, the Sovietization of Eastern Europe was both good in itself and the best guarantee of the survival of the Russian revolutionary state.

After Stalin’s death, and more especially following the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, there were signs of change. In Italy, the increasingly independent attitude of the Communist party itself, nuancing its identification with the Soviet Union in a variety of ways, made it easier for “right-thinking” intellectuals of the Left to distance themselves from the Soviet bloc without rendering themselves vulnerable to charges of having sold out to the Americans. In Britain and the United States, the Manichaean habits of the Cold War declined, making it possible for socialists and liberals to criticize their own governments without offering an accompanying apologia for the order of things in Prague or Moscow. Only in France, where the cultural hegemony of the Communist party had not yet diminished, was criticism of the Soviet invasion of Hungary (by Sartre, for example) still ritually followed by a reaffirmation of faith in the possibilities of communism.6

Notwithstanding these developments, and the momentary outburst of anger at the events of 1956, Central Europe remained essentially invisible to Western thinkers. For with the diminished credibility of the Soviet utopia (notably as a by-product of Khruschev’s revelations at the Twentieth Congress), the intelligentsia of the Left in
the West turned away from the region altogether and began instead to project their hopes onto the non-European world. As a consequence, with attention centered on Algeria, Ghana, Cuba, and (eventually) the Far East, the Soviet satellites closer to home became an embarrassing irrelevance—irrelevant because for all but the most hard-bitten of Communists they no longer served as prototypes of postrevolutionary societies, embarrassing because they offered disconcertingly proximate reminders of the achievements of real socialism in its European homelands.

If anything, the gap between East and West that had opened up in 1945 became wider still after 1956. In the immediate postwar years, some intellectuals in the Soviet bloc (notably in Hungary and Czechoslovakia) still spoke the same language as their Western colleagues, criticizing their own governments in the name of a socialist ideal. But after 1956, intellectuals in Poland and elsewhere turned increasingly critical of the Marxist regimes they had helped create, offering revisionist critiques of the political and economic impasse of the peoples’ democracies and becoming even less inclined to accept the terms of debate and description officially approved. Similar distaste for mainstream Communist practice produced the New Left in France and Italy during the 1960s, but there the parallel ends, for the anti-Communist Left in Paris or Rome had nothing but scorn for the “bourgeois” concerns of the reformist critics in Prague or Warsaw. It was this fear that the East European revisionists had abandoned Stalinism only to embrace liberalism that accounts for the lukewarm response in many radical circles in the West to the Prague Spring. The appearance of Soviet tanks in August 1968 met of course with near-universal condemnation, but Western intellectuals, absorbed in their domestic conflicts and mobilized against the war in Vietnam, had been far from enthused by the moderate aspirations of a Dubček. As for the student protests of March 1968 in Warsaw, they were drowned out by the debates in the Sorbonne, while the subsequent anti-Semitic repression in Poland aroused hardly an echo in opinion-making circles in the West.

It is thus not absurdly counterintuitive to suggest that whereas 1956 and 1968 in Central Europe marked staging points in the revival of cultural and political self-consciousness in these lands, these years had a depressingly contrasting effect in the West. In effect, they served further to remove Central Europe from the attention of
Western intellectuals by rendering it progressively less relevant to their concerns. Just as in 1950 the other half of Europe had been treated simply as a reflection of the Soviet Union, so the latter’s fall from grace (in part as a result of its actions in the region) dragged Central Europe itself away from the focus of attention. By the early 1970s, following the emergence of Gierek in Poland and Husák in Czechoslovakia, and with the “independent” policies of Kádár and Ceauşescu, Central and Eastern Europe appeared once again to be stable; the events of the 1960s had been followed by “normalization,” and interest, such as it was, had dissipated.

It is thus all the more remarkable that in the space of less than a generation, Central Europe is once again on the agenda of the West. Editorials in the major dailies of Britain, France, Italy, the United States, and of course West Germany are devoted to the theme. Significant journals of opinion assign whole issues to the subject. Colloquia are held from Berkeley to Berlin on the geography, history, culture, politics, and meaning of the very term. Emigrés from all the lands of Eastern and Central Europe are called upon to offer their views, and prominent literati expatriate confidently upon the works of authors whose names and countries they could not have pronounced a few years before. There has been a spate of studies on *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, with similar books on their way for pre-1914 Budapest and Prague (anticipatory echoes, perhaps, of our own nearly completed century). Exhibitions on the art, architecture, and society of early twentieth-century Central Europe have traveled halfway around the world. Today, we are all Central Europeans. What happened?

One answer might simply consist of a list of events from the 1970s. Between the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* in 1973 and the declaration of martial law in Poland in 1981, there intervened the Helsinki Conference and Agreement of 1975, the strikes in Poland in 1976 followed by the creation of KOR (Workers’ Defense Committee), the announcement the following year of the birth of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, and of course the remarkable emergence of Solidarity in Poland in the summer of 1980. In the local context, these might be seen as part of a cumulative series of catalytic moments, starting with the uprising in East Berlin in 1953. But for the West the developments of the 1970s and 1980s came as if from nowhere, with correspondingly dramatic effects.
Nonetheless, such a litany of significant news items from abroad cannot in itself account for the reception accorded them at home. One reason for the response of Western intellectuals in recent years is the shift in the domestic political balance. During the 1950s and 1960s, anticommunism was most marked among scholars and writers of the northern countries of the West—notably West Germany. In the south (e.g., Italy, France), where strong local Communist parties flourished, the dominant left-leaning intelligentsia was largely undiluted by critical voices from the Center, much less the Right (witness the fate of Raymond Aron, ignored in Paris for most of his career but lionized in the Federal Republic and the United States). Since most postwar Western intellectuals took their cues from Paris, the pattern of intellectual response to events in the Soviet bloc was much as described above. But from the mid-1970s on, the Communists have been in decline in Latin Europe (precipitate in France and Spain, steady in Italy), with moderate Social Democratic parties replacing them on the left of the domestic political spectrum. If anything, it is the left intelligentsia of northern Europe that is now more sympathetic toward Soviet policies and actions. The peace initiative of 1979, coinciding as it did with the coming of Cruise and Pershing missiles, received a friendly hearing in political and academic circles in Scandinavia, West Germany, the Benelux countries, and Britain. By way of contrast, the increasingly anti-Communist intelligentsia of France in particular turned a deaf ear to Moscow but listened with growing interest to news and views from the Soviet satellites.

If this explanation helps us see why men and women in Paris or Rome are once again interested in developments to their east, it does not in itself account for the positively modish taste for talking about Central Europe in particular. To account for this fashion, which has now spread to the United States as well, we should perhaps begin with Milan Kundera. In articles that appeared between 1981 and 1985 in American, French, and British journals, he decried the impending disappearance of Central Europe, the deleterious effect of Russian domination of the region, and Western ignorance of the vital significance of the central lands for the survival of Europe as a whole. In Kundera’s wake came a veritable baggage train of Central European writers. In many cases they had been around before Kundera and had even been saying much the same sort of thing. But
now they were noticed in the West for the first time by something more than a minority of specialists and fellow nationals. Important works by historians and philosophers from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia were translated into English (translations into French and Italian had come a little earlier in most cases, and into German earlier still), while accessible writings hitherto published only in emigré journals like *Zeszyty Literackie, Listy,* and *Svědectví* received rapid translation and recognition in Italy, France, Britain, the United States, and Canada.

Kundera’s is a peculiarly Czech vision of Central Europe—gloomy, skeptical, suspicious, self-critical, and insecure, and the way in which it colors his polemics has undoubtedly in turn affected the Anglo-American understanding of the concept. But his own work is also the culmination of a process. Periodicals concerned with Central Europe (such as *Alternative* in France and *Cross Currents* in the United States) existed before Kundera’s work accelerated interest in them, although the writings of 1984 in particular certainly provided a stimulus for other publications (*Autre Europe*, begun in 1984, *Micro-Mega,* and *East European Reporter,* established in 1986). In general, the reception accorded in the West to emigré and dissident writers appears to have been a process of accumulation. Those who left Czechoslovakia or Poland in 1968–1969 took nearly a decade to receive a hearing (except in Germany, and Austria, where Vienna and Munich proved hospitable to exiles of the Left in particular). Even in the rare instance to the contrary, interest was not always of the most welcome kind. Leszek Kołakowski, the Polish philosopher and leading revisionist thinker of the 1950s, aroused interest among Western intellectuals more for his magnum opus on Marxist thought than for his many writings on theology and ethics, a preference that is indirect confirmation of the very different concerns of radical intellectuals in the two halves of Europe.

By the time Solidarity appeared, however, the ground was a little more fertile and intellectual celebrities like Adam Michnik could get published and read almost as rapidly in the West as in the underground press at home in Poland. Sympathy with Lech Walesa and his movement (during, but especially after, its public successes) was notably marked in political and labor circles in France and Italy (and significantly tepid in Britain or West Germany). As a result, Polish emigrés and exiles of the 1981 vintage integrated almost immediately
into the inner circles of the Parisian intelligentsia. Even though their initial welcome and the enthusiasm for their cause subsided, they have never been consigned to the sort of marginal and near-pariah status accorded their predecessors.

Another factor in opening the way to a more sympathetic reception by the early 1980s was the increase in academic exchange in recent years—notably to the benefit of Hungarian scholars, who came to teach and lecture in all the Western countries, reestablishing the link with an older generation of Hungarians from 1956 and after, many of whom now hold senior positions in American universities in particular. Prominent figures like Györgi Ranki, the late Hungarian historian, organized exchanges between their own academies and Western institutions (Oxford University, the University of Indiana) and were accompanied in their endeavors by numerous Hungarian economists who debated with their Western counterparts the virtues and otherwise of the Hungarian economic model. This Eastern involvement in Western academic discussions inevitably produced at least some reciprocal Western concern for affairs in the socialist lands, a concern both real and critical, in contrast with the abstract and somewhat abstracted gaze of sympathetic leftist scholars of an earlier generation.

The reference to academic exchanges suggests that some role in the raising of Western consciousness has been played by events in the Soviet bloc itself—more communications, eased restrictions on certain categories of professional travel, new lines of official thinking on economic policy, a new generation of nonideological dissidents (but not Gorbachev, who appeared only late in the process). There is of course some truth in this, but at best it accounts for the ease with which the renewed interest in Central Europe can now be converted into knowledge. Its significance as an account of the interest itself should not be exaggerated. There have been détentes before. Indeed, almost everything that was on offer from Central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s had come around before. Kundera’s own writings had been anticipated, for example, by the Romanian Mircea Eliade, writing in Preuves, in Paris, in 1952: “These cultures [that is, those of Central Europe] . . . are on the eve of their disappearance. . . . Does not Europe feel the amputation of a very part of its flesh? Because, in the end, all these countries are in Europe, all these peoples belong to the European community.”
Yet when Eliade wrote those words, the master thinkers of Western culture looked past him. Neither neo-Marxists like Sartre nor Christian moralists like Emmanuel Mounier ignored the contemporary imprisonment of the eastern half of Europe. Indeed, they acknowledged and disapproved of it. But they and their contemporaries on the Left (with certain honorable exceptions like Elio Vittorini and Ignazio Silone) looked beyond Budapest and Bucharest, their eyes firmly fixed on the metaphistorical justifications for present Soviet misdemeanors. Moral appeals to common European sensibilities received little echo anywhere (Raymond Aron stands out as an exception in France, but then he too was only rediscovered in Paris in the early 1980s!).

The salient factor, then, was not altered circumstances in the East but changed sensibilities in the West. When Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* was published, it offered nothing except rich detail that was not already known about the Soviet system of forced labor camps (down to the very term *gulag*, used by Kravchenko in 1946). Any number of memoirs and essays had been published during the late 1940s and thereafter, and the fact of the camps’ existence was no longer disputed, as it had once been. It was the timing that counted. When the *Gulag Archipelago* arrived in the West, it encountered an intellectual community in profound flux. It would be pleasing to be able to say, with the Yugoslav writer Danilo Kis, that the sympathetic reception accorded to Central Europe has arisen from the Western discovery “that it had lost a part of its own heritage and that it had been thereby impoverished.” But this is naive. Czechs, Poles, and Hungarians have long looked West in search of confirmation of their European identity (Hungarians and Poles with some ambiguity perhaps). That they should now, beginning in the late 1970s, have met with a response is gratifying, but that is little owing to any collective Western sense of loss.

What had been lost, notably in France and Italy, was the faith in Marxism (it is a matter of some curiosity that Marxism still survives and occasionally thrives among intellectuals and academics in the English-speaking world, where it has never acquired any political purchase; for this reason among others, Central Europeans feel more at home in Latin Europe). The spell cast over the radical intelligentsia of Western Europe by Marxism from 1945–1975 was not of course dissipated overnight. The trajectory of French intellectuals is para-
digmatic (the more so in that during these years theirs was the example most commonly followed). First, in 1956, there came the double blow of Khrushchev’s speech and the attack on Hungary, ending the consubstantiality of Marxism-Party-proletariat. Then, Marxism was exported, with spontaneous peasantsions ostensibly replacing organized workers in the driving seat of history. Only when this myth in turn lost its credibility (somewhere between the Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot) did intellectuals return their gaze to Europe, a continent where the Soviet Union had once again, in 1968, contributed to the further undermining of its own foundation myth. By the time Solzhenitsyn appeared in French translation, the former epigones of Stalin and Mao had adjusted their critical fire, first on Marx, then on Hegel, and finally on all forms of utopian or system-building theories, deemed collectively responsible for their totalitarian progeny.\textsuperscript{15}

In other words, it was only when French intellectuals had found their own reasons (highly idealistic and abstract) for reclassifying Marxism as a failed and faulted fantasy of nineteenth-century master thinkers that they could look afresh at the Soviet Union (or \textit{a fortiori} Eastern Europe) and recognize more earthbound reasons for weighing ideological anchor. And even then, the mirage of Eurocommunism (a brief moment from 1975 to 1978 when there was hope that the Communists of France, Italy, and Spain would forge a renewed, democratic Communist movement) slowed down the process. But the coincidence of domestic political decline (for all Western Communist parties), continued ideological etiolation, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the rise and fall of Solidarity helped complete the picture. By 1982, Marxism in its former Western strongholds was almost as dead as it is in the lands of its enronement and a channel of communication had opened up. Once they stopped sounding like Party bureaucrats and began to speak the same language as their Central European counterparts, Western intellectuals could begin to hear what the latter were saying.

The reference here to language is not entirely gratuitous. Another element in the pan-European convergence was the reemergence of rights in Western political theory. For most of this century, philosophers and political theorists have disdained “rights talk,” either on the grounds that rights cannot be logically grounded (Bentham’s “nonsense on stilts”) or else because they are historically circum-
scribed, the product of circumstance and legal practice, rather than timeless and essential. And for Marxists, of course, the term was usually preceded by a pejorative qualifying adjective (e.g., “bourgeois”). But a number of seminal English-language works of political thought published during the 1970s began the task of replacing rights at the center of ethically based political argument, supported in this by numerous special-interest groups seeking to appropriate the language of rights in support of their claims (“women’s rights,” etc.). Although these writings have only recently begun to be translated into French and Italian, the growing local interest in analytical political philosophy as a substitute for discredited continental metaphysics is unmistakable.

It does not always follow from this that the language of rights now in vogue in the West corresponds tidily to the sort of rights that dissident intellectuals in Central Europe have been claiming for many years. When Central European dissidents talk about rights, they often mean something both larger and more precise than the sense contained in the more restricted philosophical discourse of Western theorists (though here the Italians and French serve as something of a bridge). Nonetheless, it does not seem unreasonable to see in these developments the emergence of a common language of political claims and duties.\textsuperscript{16}

One effect of the new Western enthusiasm for rights talk (an enthusiasm which, in Paris at least, is on occasion demagogic and in inverse proportion to previous interest in the subject) has been to offer a way of undermining the cultural relativism so fashionable in Western writings of the 1960s and early 1970s, that very particular refusal to criticize the ways of others (however abhorrent) in the name of one’s own political culture. The revival of a variety of neo-Kantianism offers the possibility of condemning the ethical shortcomings of others and has enabled Western writers to deal directly with the experience of Central Europeans, instead of denying them the very evidence of their own senses, as in the past. This observation is not universally applicable, however. There are still writers and teachers in the West who cling to the philosophies of suspicion, heirs to Heidegger and Sartre where they are not also the followers of Derrida. But it is significant that Western intellectuals today form less of a bloc than at any time since the war; there are to be found, scattered from Milan to Michigan, followers of Marx,
Gramsci, Foucault, Nietzsche, Popper, Proudhon, and Jesus as well as those who follow none of the above. Or, to take just one important contemporary figure, it would have been unthinkable for Jürgen Habermas and his communitarian liberalism to attract widespread respect among the mainstream intellectual Left until very recently indeed.17

If the death of Marxism constitutes the fundamental reference point in the new Western empathy for Central Europe, and if the fashion for rights has provided at least the illusion of a common political language, other factors have also played their part. For most of the period 1948–1973, the cultural identity of Western Europe was heavily colored by anti-Americanism. Beginning in Britain during the war itself, resentment at the privileged American ("overpaid, oversexed, and over here") took off during the 1950s, a combination of economic jealousy and political opposition fueled by the frustration born of that same European decline that had propelled the United States into its position of privilege. In France and Italy matters were exacerbated by the presence of an aggressively anti-American Communist party and by memories (especially strong in France) of the ambivalent mood during the Liberation, when resentment toward U.S. presence and policies came to outweigh appreciation of the American role in the freeing of these countries.18

Although opposition to the American alliance and the U.S. presence in Europe declined following the end of the Korean war, it was refueled by the conflict in Vietnam, which coincided with a growing sense of the reemergence of Europe as a world power. Defending the claims and the actions of the Soviet Union more as a counterweight to American power than on ideological grounds, many Europeans in the 1960s were sympathetic to de Gaulle's vision of a Europe stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals. But a Europe so described, including Russia and its western territories, paradoxically diminished the significance of the Slav and other lands on Russia's western borders by treating them simply as extensions of the mother country. Having no comparable relation to any West European nation (except Britain, in the eyes of de Gaulle), the United States was in these years regarded as both an outsider and an intruder, in Europe no less than in Southeast Asia.

In more recent times, anti-American sentiment in Europe has taken cultural rather than political form. Just as Western Europe during the
1970s was becoming more superficially Americanized (in clothing, music, and commerce), so resentment toward this process surfaced. Although the French Socialists today fall over themselves to "modernize" France on the Californian model, as recently as 1981 the minister of culture, Jack Lang, spoke out aggressively against the nefarious mediocrity of American popular culture. Spanish leftists sought the closing of American bases, partly in belated retaliation for U.S. support of Franco. And in northern Europe especially, nuclear disarmament movements have urged their governments to pursue what amounts to neutralism in international affairs. But what is common to these demonstrations of irritation toward the United States is the way in which they have increasingly been couched in the vocabulary of Europe. This is particularly the case in West Germany, where talk of Europe, not all of it confined to intellectuals of the Left, is effectively synonymous with the desire to create a nuclear-free neutral zone between the superpowers.

Here, and for the first time, West European dislike of the United States is at least potentially compatible with the perspective and interests of the other Europeans. Although the relatively mild anti-American sentiments of Italians and French still sit more comfortably with the experience and instincts of intellectuals in the Soviet bloc, the aggressive neutralism of the British, Dutch, and German activists in END (European Nuclear Disarmament) has found some favorable response, especially in East Germany, where a parallel peace movement has significant support in dissident and church circles. Initially there were difficulties, since to the ears of a Pole or a Czech, the writings of someone like Edward Thompson carry disturbing echoes from the past. Calling down a plague on the houses of Washington and Moscow alike carries little conviction to those for whom the Soviet army and its local quislings are the only reality that counts. Only when the emphasis on peace (i.e. Western disarmament) had been matched by demands for rights and the restoration of liberties to unofficial peace activists in the East was some sort of fragile dialogue established.19

It remains a slim basis for mutual understanding. What the more radical of the Western peace movements and their supporters in the Green movements have always sought is the removal of the United States from any military role in Europe. The presence of Russia in such a Europe, the exclusion of the United States, and the disarma-
ment of the Western allies strikes Socialist bloc dissidents, however sympathetic, as being monumentally naive (an opinion tacitly shared by many on the Left in France and Italy as well, further evidence of the growing importance of the north-south division in Europe today). A common opposition to militarism (expressed in some parts of Eastern Europe by a refusal to undertake military service), shared fears of nuclear and ecological catastrophe, and a certain puritan antimaterialism among writers and political activists in Czechoslovakia and West Germany, for example, point to a possible convergence of concerns but not much more.²⁰

In a sense, what we are seeing here is once again a projection of a Western radical vision onto an imaginary Central European landscape. Where once it was the fantasy of socialism, now it is the dream of “a united, independent Europe.” If it cannot be achieved in the West because of the presence and interests of the United States, then let it be enacted further east, in some loosely defined Central Europe miraculously released from all historical and geographical constraints. Indeed, the dissidents in the region, eagerly sought out by Western theorists as interlocutors and as living evidence of the plausibility of their own projects, are also something of a projection. They are ascribed a place in the Western radical’s scheme of things, serving to legitimate the anti-American bent of the West European plan for the Continent by virtue of their own symmetrical anti-Soviet radical demands. It is a role that few dissident intellectuals in Central Europe are equipped for or care to fill.

A final, circumstantial factor tending to favor interest in Central Europe has been the steady decline in the polarities and tensions of Western European political life itself. It is only a very few years since France, Italy, and Spain were gripped in the embrace of Left-Right divisions with deep historical roots, Communists and Socialists on one side, Liberals and Catholics on the other. Now, all is in flux. The most important aspect, already alluded to, is the internal transformation of the old Left, although the ending of the romance with Marxism has also opened opportunities for dialogue across the ancient divide. Socialist parties in Portugal, Spain, France, and Italy have all governed or been part of a governing coalition in the course of the past decade, and are now closer in most respects to liberals and moderates of the Center than to the Communists to whom they were once linked.
This reduced importance of the terms *left* and *right* in Western European parlance (reflected in interminable debates in France especially about the “end” of the Left and so forth) has removed the sting from debates over Central Europe. There is a remarkable level of agreement across the Western political spectrum, at least so far as it concerns the more superficial dimensions of the meaning of European identity. Milan Kundera and Václav Havel are as much admired within one political family as they are in the camp of its opponents. This is an odd situation, and it is probably destined to crumble in the face of serious political choices about the future of Central Europe. But for the present there is agreement on the essentials: Central Europe is part of Europe, it should be free, its writers and thinkers are interesting.

One explanation for this receptivity lies in the current fashion for “Euro-chat,” the obsession with plans for the big bang of 1992, when the twelve-member European Community is due to remove all barriers, tariff and human, between its constituent parts. Beyond the predictable focus on taxes, customs levies, pricing policies, and the like, there lie matters of real significance for the Continent as a whole. Over the last two decades, the European Community has moved a long way toward the creation of a federal system. In the smaller nations, but also in Italy, France, and the Federal Republic, it is no longer mere cant to speak of Europeans or a European outlook. There are of course internal distinctions; in one recent poll the British and the Danes showed little enthusiasm for the idea of a European parliament with true legislative powers. But the same poll showed the French (and especially the Italians) very much in favor of just such a federal political arrangement.\(^2\) And in general the southern half of the community has responded positively to the reduction of national distinctions—after the Italians and the French, it is the Spanish who have come around most readily to the idea (the Communist parties of France and Portugal have dragged their feet on this issue, but like the anti-Europeans within the British Labor party, their views no longer count for much with anyone).

However, the uncertainties of 1992, no less than its opportunities, have helped focus attention on “the other Europeans.” When the European Community expands still further, as it surely must, whom will it include? Austria and Yugoslavia? And after that? Such questions received little attention in earlier years, if only because all
such visions were politically unrealistic. No longer cut off from
Western Europe, with their economies already linked to the West by
loans, trade, and gifts (in the case of the two Germanies), the
countries of East Central Europe have every reason to press for closer
links, at a time when the Soviet Union is no longer actively discour-
aging such moves. West Europeans, already accustomed to talking
about the prospects for a wider, transnational Europe, can hardly
avoid acknowledging these developments. The two Europes are still
very far apart (and not just because of the East-West divide), and
much of the conversation between them is at cross-purposes. But
there is a conversation taking place, and the coming transformation
of the one-time Common Market will only intensify such exchanges.

In offering suggestions to account for the renewed Western interest
in Central Europe, I have proceeded on the fiction of a common
Western experience, a vision of Central Europe informing Western
reaction as a whole. This is a necessary fiction, if we are to grasp the
global significance of the “rediscovery.” But on the ground and in
detail there are some telling distinctions. One of these has already
been noted. In the last few years there has been quite a remarkable
revival of Germany (or the Germanies, all three of them, if we include
Austria in this context). Without some such reemergence of the
German-speaking lands onto the center of the European stage, any
rediscovery of the idea of Central Europe would have been incom-
plete (and perhaps impossible). But because of the peculiarities of the
German and Austrian situations, Central Europe again has more
than one meaning, a multiple resonance.

The German perspective on this question will be discussed at
length in another essay in this issue. (See “Central Europe or
Mitteleuropa?” by Jacques Rupnik.) Here I want simply to draw
attention to the way in which this perspective differs from that of the
Western nations. When German writers look at Central Europe, they
see a region in which there lived, in addition to Germans living in
what are now West Germany, East Germany, and Austria, some 11
million ethnic Germans. After the last war, some 9 million to 10
million of these left or were deported, some to the German Demo-
ocratic Republic, most to the Federal Republic of Germany. For a long
time they formed a phalanx of conservative voters, preventing West
German governments from recognizing the postwar settlement or
engaging directly with the satellite governments of the Soviet bloc.
The impact of that experience is now all but absorbed, but it has been replaced by an equally important concern with the past on the part of a new generation of Germans who are coming to terms with the history of the present divisions.

Here, as in the nineteenth century, Central Europe as a theme has become inextricably intertwined with debates over German identity. Left-wing intellectuals and activists look eastward for a solution to the dilemma of a divided nation, the nationalism of the Greens and of some Social Democrats feeding off a political neutralism and the anti-Americanism already noted. On the Right, the German presence in Europe’s center is part of another debate, the revisionist controversy raised by the historians Andreas Hillgruber and Ernst Nolte. For these writers, the “legitimate” fear of annihilation by the Soviets explains (and helps justify) the military actions of the Nazis, which thus become defensible even though they had the incidental effect of buying Hitler time with which to kill more Jews. As part of an updated strategy in the continuing German struggle to survive the Soviet challenge, Hillgruber especially favors the “reconstruction” of a lost Central Europe, and he is not alone.

There are other considerations, too. The renewed contacts with the GDR, and the anticipation of an expansion of the Federal Republic’s role in the economic life of the region date back to Willy Brandt and the Ostpolitik of the 1960s. With the coming of Gorbachev and the increased Soviet enthusiasm for Western links, the West Germans see themselves as the natural interlocutors in the region. Discussion of these matters and of a place for Germans in some sort of Central European community have occupied much space in the German press in recent years. But such prospects as these are far from uncontentious, domestically. For the Germans are themselves Central Europeans in this sense, that their own identity is part of the problem. Is the Rhineland in Central Europe? Is Hamburg? Certainly not in the way that would be true of Bavaria or Saxony. It is only by historical accident (or, put differently, as part of the vagaries of German history) that the Germans can be said to be actors in the rediscovery of Central Europe. What has really been disinterred is the German problem (for Germans and non-Germans alike), and that is why this subject sounds so utterly different when discussed by Germans.

The same applies to the theme in its Austrian context. Here, too, things look different. Austria might well have gone the way of
Czechoslovakia in 1945. That it did not was its good fortune, but it left the country (as in 1920) with no natural center of gravity. Now, with expanding contact across the Hungarian frontier in particular (and with Mariahilfstrasse the main shopping artery for Budapest), Austrians have once again begun to look East for an economic and a cultural constituency (in some sense they never lost it—Vienna is still a terribly important city for Eastern Europeans, their stepping-stone to the West and a vital source of news as well as commodities). It is surely significant that it is a figure in the conservative People’s party, Erhard Busek, who has raised afresh the idea of an Austro-centered Mitteleuropa, more geographically restrained than Naumann’s but with remarkable similarities to the thinking of an earlier generation of Austrians, the “Austromarxists” Otto Bauer and Rudolf Hilferding.24 To the extent that the Austrian vision of Central Europe has something in common with ideas circulating in Prague and Budapest, it is more truly in keeping with the indigenous understanding of the term than are those French or American writers who enthuse over a more abstracted Erewhon-like cultural continent.

Austria is different for another reason. The rediscovery of Central Europe, as seen from Vienna, includes a region almost wholly neglected in Western debates. For Austria is a neighbor of Yugoslavia, and there, too, the term Central Europe has a special local resonance. Whereas for Czechs it means seeking to rejoin the West, and in West Germany it is a movement away from the (American-dominated) West, so in Yugoslavia it is about regional autonomy. The republics of Croatia and Slovenia (the latter especially) have always felt uncomfortable as part of a multinational federation dominated by Serbs and including poorer, southern national groups who were never part of a European empire and whose failing economies are subsidized by the more prosperous north (echoes of similar resentments in Italy). Here, then, discussions about Central Europe are a way of expressing anti-Serb opinions and are also part of a longer, larger debate between unity and particularism. For many Slovene and Croat intellectuals it is a question of peripheries. Of which center are Zagreb and Ljubljana the fringes—Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia or the Central Europe to which they once belonged in the old Dual Monarchy? The link to Austria is obvious: the Austrian region of Carinthia has a significant Slav minority, and Slovenes in particular are at least as much a part of any Austro-centered European heartland as, say, Slovakia.
That Yugoslavia should until very recently have been left out of Western discussions is of course an ironic tribute to Tito’s success in separating the experience of his country from that of the rest of Central and Southeastern Europe. Only in Italy has there been some attention to this matter, and that for a very special reason: in Italy, too, Central Europe is in part a domestic matter. In this respect Italy stands aside from the rest of the West as commonly defined. Much of northern Italy was until fairly recently part of the Austrian Empire. Lombardy was only liberated in the war of 1859–1960, and the region of Friuli–Venezia Giulia was Austrian until 1866 and even today contains significant German and Slav minorities. Like other Italian regions in recent years, it has sought to expand its regional autonomy and assert a local identity. But unlike other such regions of the country, the northeast has sought to secure its distance from Rome through the formation of a transnational region for mutual cultural collaboration, comprising Friuli–Venezia Giulia, Austrian Carinthia, Slovenia, and Croatia. The political and economic significance of this collaboration, known as Alpen-Adria, is necessarily limited, but it has colored perception of the Central Europe debate in the country.

Italy is in any case different in other ways as well. Like the Federal Republic, it has welcomed dissidents from the Soviet bloc for many years. Czechs especially, but Hungarians and Poles as well, have taken up posts in the universities, held elected and appointed offices, and been prominent in the print and other media. When Alexander Dubček came to accept an honorary degree from the University of Bologna in November 1988, his presence and his speech were matters of national prominence. The role of the Italian Communists is relevant here. For a long time the Italian Communist party (PCI) functioned as a conduit for negotiations between discontented Western Communist reformers and the Moscow center to which they still owed formal allegiance. In 1981, however, the popular leader of the party, the late Enrico Berlinguer, condemned the declaration of martial law in Poland, just as he had openly split with Brezhnev over the invasion of Afghanistan. Ever since then, the PCI and its national daily paper L’Unita have served as privileged outlets for dissident and opposition thought within the Soviet bloc as well as in the West. As a result, the left-leaning Italian political community has been kept unusually well informed about ideas and events in Poland, Czecho-
slovakia, and Hungary in particular, and Central Europe is a place and a theme with which Italian readers are well acquainted.

Finally, and in marked contrast with the French, Italian intellectuals have less reason for guilt and embarrassment over their writings and actions during the Stalinist and post-Stalinist years. They have thus spent rather less time atoning for past sins and have been less extreme in their abandonment of all past affilliations. They are thus not quite so apt to have flights of pessimistic fancy as their Parisian colleagues, and they may have a better-informed view of what is and is not realistic in the future of Central Europe. At the same time, theirs is a closer and probably more enduring concern with the region than that of British or American writers.

Nonetheless, it is precisely along the Atlantic seaboard of both continents that the rediscovery of Central Europe has been most touted. Is it a passing fashion, the vacuum left by Marxism and filled by nostalgia and fantasy, by cost-free demands for the recognition of human rights and an expanded cultural tourism? What future is there for “Central Europe” (as distinct from the prospects for the place itself)?

To begin with, it should be acknowledged that if there is indeed a wider Western acquaintance with Central Europe, it has not so far led to a deeper understanding (in this respect Kundera’s plea, addressed to Western intellectuals, has fallen on ground little more fertile than that worked by Mitosz and Eliade in an earlier generation). Take the case of the universities. The academic study of the history, politics, or literature of the region between Germany and the Soviet Union remains a minority taste. Very few universities in Western Europe or North America teach the languages of Central, Eastern, or Southeastern Europe. Where courses on the region exist, they normally treat it as a subordinate field in the wider category of Soviet studies (or Soviet history or Russian and Slavonic literature). Few students take such courses, fewer still learn any of the relevant languages, and only an infinitesimal minority give serious thought to specializing in the region.

One reason for this is the generally poor quality of the instruction they are likely to receive. A disturbingly high proportion of the knowledgeable teachers are exiled nationals of the countries of the region. The older ones came in the 1950s, a middle generation dates from the Polish and Czech exodus of 1968–1969, and a smaller
number left and came West after the suppression of Solidarity. If the situation in the Soviet bloc does not suddenly deteriorate, this supply is likely to dry up. The education of the West in the history and culture of half of Europe will come to depend on professors trained in other areas, with at best only a secondary interest in Central Europe itself.

This situation is superficially alleviated in France and Italy by the presence in universities and institutes of professional experts, men and women with a genuine interest in the subject of Central Europe but often with no firsthand knowledge of it and trained in something else (even linguistic competence is often an optional extra). In Britain, where interest in the subject is lower than on the Continent, the history and politics of at least eight separate Central or Southeastern European states are commonly taught by experts in Soviet affairs, who unabashedly treat Eastern Europe as an adjunct to the study of the Soviet Union (echoing an earlier generation who saw the same region as a mere footnote to the study of another “historical” nation, in that case Germany).  

In Oxford and Cambridge, for example, the study of Central Europe can only be pursued as a minor option in courses devoted to the Soviet Union. Things are better in the United States and Canada, but not by very much. And it is an open secret that in recent years it has not proved easy to recruit into East European studies the very best graduate students.

If I am correct in my earlier characterization of the reasons for the rediscovery of Central Europe, this lack of any concerted academic focus is not surprising, for most of the factors leading to the renewed receptivity of Western intellectuals are negative—the end of Marxism, loss of faith in the Soviet Union, suspicion of the United States, neutralism. It is not, after all, as though there had been some seminal work on Central Europe in recent years that captures and transforms the Western consciousness. And I think, too, that this situation helps explain something else, the particularly sympathetic reception accorded what we might call the cultural reading of Central Europe offered by Kundera and by the Hungarian novelist György Konrád—Central Europe as an idea, a state of mind, a worldview.

Kundera in particular was addressing himself to the West, and his vision of a disappearing Central Europe accords most closely with the revived interest in the general European fin-de-siècle. But whereas nostalgia for Proust’s Paris or the London of Edward VII is compat-
ible with an acknowledgment of present realities (Paris and London are still with us), an enthusiasm for the Vienna of Freud, or Kafka's Prague, cannot but be bound up in a sense of regret and loss. Hence the understandably fonder memories of the Habsburg Empire, once so reviled by most of its subjects. Milan Kundera is not of course proposing a revival of Kakania, the Austria-Hungary of Robert Musil which has somehow entered Western mismemory as a fantasy kingdom conflated from Johann Strauss and Graham Greene. But it is the Czechs, more than most, who have opened up for debate the original wisdom of destroying the multinational state, and their sense certainly is that it is Czechoslovakia, as the most western of the lost lands of Europe, that has suffered the most from events since 1918.²⁷

Between this and the often-noted analogy with the Jewish experience (the Czechs frequently detecting an affinity in the situation and a precariousness about the two peoples), it is not surprising that the Czech understanding of what is at stake in Central Europe, and what has been lost, has been most influential in forming Western opinion.

As a consequence, few of the newly minted Western enthusiasts for Central Europe care to learn too much about the deep historical rifts within the region. Not many Western writers now pay much attention, for example, to Hungary's losses in the settlements that followed both world wars. Yet these losses of people and territory were to the advantage of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia and comprised some 25 percent of the ethnic population of Hungary. To take another example, the rather better understanding of Polish suffering and the prominence of certain Polish writers and thinkers does not in itself increase Western appreciation of the difference between the Polish and the Czech understanding of what is meant by Central Europe. Many of Poland's poets and writers look East rather than West for their roots, to Vilna rather than Vienna. If they have looked to the West, to Paris in particular, it has been in a search for understanding and contact, not because they harbor any doubts about the centrality and legitimacy of their own national culture. To take a final example, there is Bucharest (or what now remains of it), a city whose intelligentsia long saw themselves having a privileged relationship with Paris, a relationship still echoed, albeit dimly, by the uniquely French interest in Romanian matters. Yet for many Central Europeans (and not just Hungarians justifiably bitter over Ceaușescu's treatment of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania), Romania is not
even part of the region, but is eastern, perhaps Balkan. Is Romania, then (with or without its present dictator), a part of Central Europe? How many Westerners, even today, know or care? More to the point, do they know how much their own lack of concern is shared in Central Europe itself?

There is a Central European fantasy of a never-never Europe of tolerance, freedom, and cultural pluralism. It is held to be all the more firmly implanted in the consciousness of Czechs and Hungarians, for example, for want of the reality. But whereas for Central Europeans this fantasy has served perhaps as a necessary myth, it is odd to see it reflected in Western fantasies about Central Europe, the geographical expression. To suppose that this part of the Continent was once a near-paradise of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic multiplicity and compatibility, producing untold cultural and intellectual riches, has been part of the Western image in recent years. Yet such imaginings take us back to Kakania again, when in truth Central Europe, from the Battle of the White Mountain down to the present, is a region of enduring ethnic and religious intolerance, marked by bitter quarrels, murderous wars, and frequent slaughter on a scale ranging from pogrom to genocide. Western Europe was not always much better, of course, but on the whole it has been luckier, which is almost as good. And it is surely reasonable for Central Europeans, in the light of their history, to dream a little of Sweden. But it is just as surely inappropriate for the West to make of Central Europe a fantasy, past or present. Indeed, it smacks of bad taste, and is not so very different from the other sorts of political fantasies projected eastward in the 1950s.

The problem seems to be that Central Europe is always at risk of being the product of someone’s imagination. For many years it was an ideological projection of Western radical thought. With ideology currently being sold very short, Central Europe has become the idealized Europe of our cultural nostalgia. Because this has something in common with the way certain prominent dissidents have chosen to articulate their opposition to Soviet domination, a dialogue has been struck up. But down on the ground, Central Europe remains a very opaque sort of proposition. Is some sort of Central European federation a future possibility? Is it sensible to envisage an expansion of the present European Community to include, say, Hungary and Czechoslovakia? It does seem improbable. Commentary 98 of the
current Czech criminal code explicitly forbids any propagation of the idea of a Central European federation, and starting with its veto of a Balkan federation in 1948, the Soviet Union has always frowned upon that sort of bilateral relationship between its allies, much less multinational federal linkages. As to whether the European Community could absorb even more peripheral members, serious doubts have already been expressed in certain quarters. Taking in Portugal, Spain, and Greece has already created many difficulties—much expense and some local resentment.

The concentration on Central Europe as a cultural entity shorn of its immediate geopolitical constraints has entailed ignoring one of the most salient features of its recent history. The fact is that the future of Europe still rests on extra-European considerations, notably the intentions of the Soviet Union (which is why some West Europeans have taken to including Russia in the European equation, resolving the difficulty by redefining it). Central Europe’s future is still very largely dependent on the outcome of events in Moscow. And here a curious paradox begins to emerge. As the Gorbachev reforms proceed in the Soviet Union, the Western attitude toward his country grows distinctly more favorable. Whereas just nine or ten years ago the Soviet Union was seen by most observers in Europe and the United States as the brutal headquarters of an imprisoned continent, so now it is seen by many as Central Europe’s best hope. If only, the argument runs, the rulers in Prague or Berlin or Bucharest would follow Moscow’s lead.

But as a result of this shift in perspective, interest in the West has already begun to move away from Central Europe toward the Soviet Union. In this sense, it sometimes seems as though intellectuals in the West have a limited tolerance for news and opinion from the East. Appreciation of the importance of Moscow is gained only at the price of diminished interest in the space between, just as the recent enthusiasm for Central Europe was secured at the price of a refusal to acknowledge the continuing Soviet presence there. How many writers in Britain or the United States have responded comprehendingly to the opinion of certain Hungarian critics, who warn that if perestroika amounts at best to nothing more than imitation of the new economic model as implemented by Kádár, then things look pretty bleak? This is not something that most people want to hear just now. It becomes possible to imagine a scenario in which
Gorbachev offers Central Europe de facto autonomy, thereby so raising the stock of the Soviet Union in the eyes of Western thinkers that they will lose all interest in listening to the views of the Central Europeans themselves.

Of course, no such hypothesis applies in the case of the West Germans. Although the present West German government, like its predecessors, cares little for the interests of the successor states as such, and has always preferred to deal directly with the puppet master, the debate that has opened up in Germany on that nation's recent past and its future prospects will not soon subside. And to the extent that it is of necessity about the division of Europe, its causes and meaning, it is also a debate that will always be about Central Europe. But here a further consideration intrudes. Any serious resolution of the German question as it concerns a divided country, any long-term role for Austria in some newly constructed Mitteleuropa, would require the dismantling of the postwar settlements.

Such a prospect is not necessarily one that all would favor. That the Soviet Union would oppose any undoing of Yalta is obvious. The whole point of Helsinki and the human-rights concessions it entailed was to secure international confirmation of the permanence of the postwar arrangements. But Western governments, from Rome to Paris, not to speak of London and Washington, also have an abiding interest in the present stability—always assuming things do remain stable and on the condition of a reasonably benevolent Soviet leadership. Even Poles and Czechs might not look too kindly on serious revisions. An opening up of the map of Europe for diplomatic reconsideration would raise too many ghosts. Accordingly, it seems fair to expect the present dispensation to remain in place, nibbled away only at the margins, and in no case in the name of some reestablished Central European independence.

This, above all, is why the whole subject remains in the hands of the Zivilisationsliterati, of East and West alike. This is not such a terrible thing, and it by no means consigns Central Europe to insignificance. After all, the fashion will pass, but it will at the very least leave in paperback translations a library full of works by authors, living and dead, of whom the Western reader was hitherto ignorant. It has increased Western travel to Central and Eastern Europe (which is probably just about a net benefit to all parties), and in Italy and France it has certainly enriched local cultural and
intellectual life through the presence of a host of exiled and emigré writers, actors, artists, philosophers, and politicians.

On the other hand, it is likely that interest in Central Europe will fade fastest where it is indeed only an interest in the literary output of the region and where firsthand acquaintance with Central Europeans and their culture and history is slim or nonexistent. But where the discussion of Central Europe forms part of other debates of enduring local significance, as in Italy, or where, for whatever reason, there is a significant Central European presence (as in Toronto), there it may be expected to last. What this suggests is that, as so often in the checkered history of that part of the world, its fate (or, in this case, the Western echo of that fate) lies only partially in its own hands.

This is no doubt particularly galling when it takes the form of being reinvented by those who until only recently ignored one’s very existence, although Central European writers may draw some ironic satisfaction from the role they have inadvertently played in the remaking of our own Western intelligentsia. But what Western enthusiasts for Central Europe so often miss is the beam of weariness in the eyes of Polish or Czech writers as they explain themselves to their new audience. There is a sort of asymmetrical exploitation at work here. Dissident writers and thinkers from Budapest and Warsaw look West by habit and necessity, for support (practical if not moral). But this does not mean that they for one second accept the audience’s view of them or that they define their own identity and existence via that audience’s acknowledgment or appreciation. Similarly, the Western intellectual has in recent years used the concept and example of Central Europe to renew and recast cultural and political debates at home, in Paris or New York, conducting a kind of domestic housecleaning with imported equipment. It will take time to overcome this historically conditioned state of semicommunication. Meanwhile, Central Europeans may take comfort from the thought that they were there long before they were so fortuitously rediscovered. Should they again be misplaced, they will doubtless survive.

ENDNOTES


3 See Elemér Hantos, *Mémorandum sur la crise économique des pays danubins* (Vienna: St. Norbertus, 1933), and *Der Weg zum neuen Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: Mitteleuropaverlag, 1933).


7 In 1969, certain prominent intellectuals in the French Parti Socialiste Unifié, the home of much New Left thought at the time, condemned their party’s leaders (Michel Rocard and Pierre Mendès-France) for supporting the Czech reformers. The latter, they declared, were “victimes consentantes des idéologies petites-bourgeoises (humanisme, liberté, justice, progrès, suffrage universel secret, etc. . .).” Quoted by Pierre Grémion in *Paris-Prague* (Paris: Julliard, 1985), 79.


9 *Micro-Mega* does not confine its attention exclusively to Central Europe—far from it. But many of the articles in this review by Central Europeans, notably those translated from the Hungarian, suggest a particular interest in the subject within the nonparty Left in Italy. *Alternative*, founded in Paris in 1979, went under in 1984 but has since resurfaced as *La Nouvelle Alternative*, devoted exclusively to Central and Eastern Europe. Its first issue appeared in 1986.


12 Raymond Aron’s *Mémoires* were published in Paris in 1983 (by Julliard) to a fanfare of enthusiasm, in contrast to the silence that greeted his writings over the previous thirty years. For Vittorini, who crossed swords with the Communist leader Togliatti before leaving the Party, see *Diario in Pubblico* (Milan: Bompiani, 1957), notably the entries for January 1947. Among many writings by Ignazio Silone, see his speech to the International Conference of the PEN Club on 5 June 1947, “Sur la dignité de l’intelligence et l’indignité des intellectuels,” reprinted in *Les Temps Modernes* (23–24) (August-September 1947): 405–12.

13 For a representative example of the available evidence, see Viktor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom* (New York: Scribner’s, 1946); and David Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948). In the late 1940s in Paris, David Rousset sued two Communist journalists for libel. They had accused him of inventing the existence of camps in


16 See, in this context, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), and Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977). Although not published in translation until some years later (Rawls was the first to secure a European audience), these works of moral and legal philosophy have become well known in academic circles in Western Europe. They are taken to be about rights in a broader sense, which is more important for many of their readers than the philosophical debates to which they were in fact contributing. More directly concerned with human rights as such were the essays of Joel Feinberg. See his *Rights, Justice and the Bounds of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

17 In this context, the most representative of Habermas's recent work is *Autonomy and Solidarity* (London: Verso, 1986).


19 See the comments of Václav Havel, who, frequently visited by Western peace activists, for a long time saw the disarmament movement as a vehicle for the diversion and neutralizing of the Western intelligentsia, in "Politika a svědomí," *Svědectví* 18 (1984): 631.


22 See, for example, Jochen Löser and Ulrike Schilling, *Neutralität für Mitteleuropa: Das Ende der Böcke* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 1984), where Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary receive a total of ten pages, while Germany and its anomalous situation take up most of the book. The real interest lies in the perceived threat of Central Europe as a nuclear war zone. See also the slim volume by Karl Schlögel, *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts: Die Deutschen, der verlorene Osten und Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986).
For details of this debate, which has deeply divided the German historical profession and been widely debated in the press, see the material collected in *Der Historikerstreit, Chronologisch Geordnete Quellensammlung 1986–1987* (Augsburg: Fachschaft Geschichte der Universität Augsburg, May 1987). Nolte pleads his case in *Das Vergehen der Vergangenheit, Antwort an meine Kritiker in sogenanntem Historikerstreit* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1987), especially 13–68, 171–79.

Erhard Busek and Emil Brix, *Projekt Mitteleuropa* (Vienna: Uberreuter, 1986). Despite the heavy Austro-centered focus, this book has the virtue of acknowledging the many meanings of Central Europe, including the important role once played in the region by Jews.


The notable and only exception being of course London University's School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

The debate among Czech historians, which has ranged from the wisdom of advocating national independence to the ethical impropriety of the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans in 1947, has gone much further in the direction of national self-examination than has been the case in Hungary or Poland, where the nation-state goes largely unquestioned. It should be noted that in Czechoslovakia such debate is usually conducted within the dissident community, official history being in a supine and depressed condition since the purge of the academy in 1969–1970. See H. Gordon Skilling, "The Muse of History—1984," *Cross Currents* 3 (1984): 30–42; Charter 77, document no. 11, 1984; "Právo na dejiny," *Listy* 14 (5) (October 1984): 11–76; Petr Pithart, "Let Us Be Gentle to Our History," *Kosmas* 3 (2–4) (Winter 1984–Summer 1985): 7–22.

Even where an interest in "the other Europe" persists, it is often merely pro forma. Thus, in a recent collection of essays, published in Paris under the title of *Lettres d'Europe* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988), the introduction by Jean-Pierre Angremy (pseudonym for a highly placed French Foreign Ministry official) speaks with rotund enthusiasm of the European ideal, "from Edinburgh to Sofia, from Lisbon to Leningrad." Having acquitted himself of this ritual bow in the direction of Central and Eastern Europe, Angremy then confines his attention exclusively to an area delimited by the European Community (minus Portugal). No further reference is made to the other Europe.

It is not uncommon to find this sort of cavalier inclusion or dismissal, in writings from France especially, and such an approach is quite often (and not perhaps accidentally) accompanied by the assumption that Central Europe stretches to the Volga. As a rule, the larger the geographical area covered by the term, the shorter the span of attention paid to it.