



FAMILIAR DISTANCES AND UNEXPECTED
PROXIMITIES
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Born in 1973. Currently, I am finishing my Ph.D. dissertation in Comparative History at the Central European University, Budapest. I studied Philosophy and History at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (1991–97). M.A. in Nationalism Studies at the Central European University (1998). Research student at the University of Cambridge, King’s College (1999–2000). I was a founding member of the international research group “Regional Identity Discourses in Central and Southeast Europe (1775–1945)”, editing a three-volume collection of texts thematizing collective identity (forthcoming in 2004). I was an Associate Fellow of the NEXUS Project at the Centre for Advanced Study, Sofia, 2001–02); a guest scholar at the Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Ostmitteleuropas, Leipzig, 2002, and a Junior Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna, 2002. I published articles on East-Central European history of political ideas, comparative historiography, and methodology of history writing and co-edited two volumes: Balázs Trencsényi, Dragoş Petrescu, Cristina Petrescu, Constantin Iordachi, and Zoltán Kántor, eds. *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies*. Budapest, 2001. András Czeglédi, Zsolt Novák, Dénes Schreiner, Balázs Trencsényi, eds. *Ész, természet, történelem* (Reason, Nature and History). Budapest, 2002. – Address: Central European University, Department of History, Nádor u. 11, Budapest, 1051 Hungary. E-mail: nphtre14@phd.ceu.hu.

During the three months I spent at Wiko as a Mellon Fellow, I have been working on a project concerning Central and Southeast European discourses of “national characterology”, concentrating mainly on the Romanian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian cases. Eastern

European historiographical traditions usually thematize the evolution of social and political ideas in view of a *discursive autarchy*. This “monadic” perception of a given national tradition can be effectively challenged by introducing alternative models based on comparative research. Studying the generational dynamics or the simultaneous processes of internalizing the same set of “European ideas” makes one aware of the fact that the cross-cultural patterns of similarity might be more important than usually thought, while the discursive discontinuities between different generations and “subcultures” within the same “national” canon might be more significant than usually admitted.

Although the “European” ingredients were almost identical, the respective national canons gave highly divergent responses to the challenges of the inter-war political and cultural crisis. While, in Romania, the anti-historicist modality of characterology became preponderant by the 1930s and engendered a project of national metaphysics; in Hungary, the nationalist idiom was much more embedded in the traditionalist discourse of a normative past, so the issue of national character became the battleground of the two – historicist and anti-historicist – visions. At the same time, in Bulgaria, where the historicist discourse was less integrated in the tradition of characterology, focusing on the “ahistoric” peasantry, collective identity came to be thematized in view of symbolic geography and national psychology. Using the excellent research opportunities provided by the Kolleg, I tried to contextualize my findings from the broader perspective of European intellectual developments of the period, paying particular attention to such phenomena as the “Konservative Revolution” in the German context (which has parallels in many other European cultures), the emergence of “generational ideologies” in the twenties, the “Historismus-Debatte”, and the corresponding French intellectual trends, seeking to reconsider the symbolic basis of collective existence.

Even though it concerns a rather different time frame, my other project that I tried to complete at Wiko has many traits in common with my research on the “national characterologies”. I also worked on the European context of my CEU dissertation research. This project seeks to reconstruct the modalities of “Hungarian discourse of nationhood” in the sixteenth- to seventeenth-century European context of political ideologies. I seek to devise a broader framework of interpretation (transgressing the customary framework of Hungarian historiography), locating these phenomena on the European “map” of the history of political ideas and describing the Hungarian discourses of nationhood in terms of the interplay of the humanist vision of *patria*, the conception of “elect nationhood”, and the

emerging ideology of “territorial statehood” rooted in the pragmatist political prudence of the “*ragion di stato*” tradition.

One of the most important common traits of these two projects is the concern with the “temporal implications” of political rhetoric: how a discursive tradition frames its temporal horizons and how, in turn, these horizons frame the tradition – locating the collective self in normative historical models. The “external” aspects of the “temporality” of political discourses is equally important – studying the different rhythms of reception, reflecting on the question of how certain traditions can be meaningfully compared and what is possible at all to compare, when we face different cultural canons.

The spontaneously emerging study-group at Wiko, focusing on historiographical cultures, was an ideal context for thinking about some of the fundamental questions of my research and devising a meta-language through which the peculiarities of the individual cases and the broader common traits could become equally tangible. The workshops and the long discussions at lunches and dinners with Hilda Sabato, Abdelahad Sebti, Carlo Severi, and Abdul Sheriff provided a natural context for my projects, creating a splendid possibility for testing my East-Central European sense of relevance on other cases and learning a lot about radically different cultural dynamisms, which are ultimately grappling with the same questions of the “imported” nature of modernity, the urge for the rethemmatization of collective memory, radical formulations of collective identity, and conflicts over the interpretation of the near – and not so near – past.

While, usually, I am asked to compare my Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian, etc. intellectual contexts mostly with Western European, or other East-Central-European traditions, now I was challenged to put my sources into a broader framework, bringing Hungary or Romania together with such different cases as Argentina, Italy, Tanzania, or Morocco. This entailed having to generalize, but seeking to avoid stereotyping (which would have meant either blurring the dividing lines and fusing every case into the diffuse category of the “third world” or contrasting my contexts to my colleagues’ accentuated “otherness” from the West, defining my own contexts simply as “Western”), and asserting divergences without falling into the trap of the narcissism of small differences. As it turned out, exactly the impossibility of finding an incontestable common denominator and having to test relative distances and proximities was the chief result of our endeavor – realizing that every new “story” made us rethink the relative position of our own culture on the symbolic map of “developed” and “underdeveloped”, “central” and “peripheral”, “Western” and “non-Western”, “Northern” and “Southern”, etc., cultures.

In contrast, the Tuesday Colloquia usually left me with the dubious self-confidence of total ignorance, which made it even easier to be carried away only by the sheer “aesthetics” and rhetorical bravado of the lectures by Raghavendra Gadagkar, Tecumseh Fitch, Eörs Szathmáry, Herbert Molderings, or Eric Brian, just to mention the most memorable ones I had the good fortune to attend.

In addition, I also had an opportunity to get to know some of the prominent German scholars dealing with the questions central to my research, i.e., identity formation and early-modern political discourses. This was due to the kindness of Andreas Edel, who was not only an attentive “institutional host”, but also shared with me many of his fascinating insights about early-modern intellectual history, the intricacies of German academia, and, last but not least, the beauties of Potsdam and the arcanum of *Spargel*-eating.

As for my more mundane activities, I have been trying to keep my form in two sports. I think I can be proud of my achievements in the field of long-distance photocopying (running both in “male single”, and, with my girlfriend, Oksana, in “mixed” competitions). I will never forget either the benevolent complicity expressed by some of my fellow Eastern Europeans (Victor Stoichița, who was doubtlessly the most encouraging fan of my efforts, and also Péter Nádas) or the equally benevolent puzzlement of Westerners, who seemed to infer that I misunderstood something, believing that xeroxing will be introduced at the forthcoming Olympic Games, and I was hoping to earn a gold medal for my long-suffering nation after Imre Kertész secured the Literary Nobel Prize.

The craze of copying (apart from the still rather uneven library situation in my region – we have the very old and the very new books, but it can be sometimes a nightmare to find a “Western” book published, say, in 1984) was also due to the equally breathtaking quickness and accuracy of the library service at the Kolleg – sometimes I had the feeling that I had just dreamt of the book and it already came the very next morning. This illusion was dissolved only at the very end of my stay, when the ever-patient librarians showed me the remaining dozens of *Zetteln* that I dropped at some point into their box, but which they could not read due to my ecstatic handwriting.

The other sporting activity was table tennis, the table being too conveniently located on the way from the Cafeteria to my room. We were playing – even if not on Olympic level, but with a heroic commitment – almost every day with Georg Striedter, and eventually we both came to regret that Irvine and Budapest are not close enough so that we could just drop by each other’s places for another match after we leave the Kolleg.

All in all, my time in Berlin was a splendid opportunity to reflect on some of the central issues of my research, both in professional and in personal terms. Studying discourses of identity is chiefly about how assumed distances and proximities shape the self, and thus the constant shift of perspectives I was exposed to when facing the plurality of life-stories, cultural intimacies, and scientific approaches represented by the Fellows at Wiko meant a formative experience.

My research topics are related to the ambivalent interaction of the representatives of Eastern European cultural elites with “the West”. Both the Hungarian students, accomplishing their year of *Peregrinatio* in Wittenberg, Heidelberg, or Franeker in the 16th–17th centuries, and the young intellectuals traveling (physically and mentally) from their native land to Berlin, Paris, or London in the first half of the 20th century, had a complex experience of “fundamental” differences, even though they were not completely alien to the intellectual paradigms they came to study. This coexistence of familiarity and otherness resulted in highly ambivalent attitudes, which can be described as “mimetic” and “stigmatic”. These attitudes entailed the urge to take home everything wholesale and the frustration rooted in the feeling of incomparability, leading to the rejection of “Western models” under the aegis of autochthonist projects.

The Hungarian predicament of the 21st century is likely to be exactly the “normalization” of this relationship. This can result in a less interesting option – a culture not remaining exotic enough, but not quite becoming “Western” either. There is a more promising scenario as well: being “Western”, but also offering a symbolic, spiritual, and even infrastructural gateway – mediating between pasts and futures, Easts and Wests, different sensitivities and senses of relevance.

The task of the generation reaching maturity during the post-1989 transition years and the EU enlargement process might well be to renegotiate these symbolic frameworks of identification and otherness – i.e., relocating our culture and stepping out of the traumatic constructions of identity. Of course, three months in the Arcadia of Wallotstraße is not quite enough (maybe even 3 years would not be enough) to reflect upon all the complexities of this predicament – it requires, at any rate, the simultaneous efforts of many scholars, artists, teachers, and politicians. But, one way or another, we all have to contribute to this process with our own means, otherwise the structures of stigmatic identification and rejection might well resurface, albeit in new garments.

With my modest means, I plan to pursue such a mediating role between perspectives in the context of my home institution, the Central European University, which was created

exactly to “renegotiate” this regional heritage in view of the post-communist world order. I am sure that the experiences I gathered in Wiko will help me enormously in this: the new friends, ideas, notes, references, books, and photocopies; the familiar distances and unexpected proximities will all remain with me and will be important reference points in the future for locating my own self, and maybe also for raising relevant questions about the collective identity discourses that permeate, for good or for bad, the cultures of Eastern Europe.