Check for updates

Daniella Gáti

Neither Centre nor Periphery: Rethinking Postcoloniality through the Perspective of Eastern Europe

In an early scene of the second season of the HBO TV series *The Wire*, the Baltimore police are confronted with the dead bodies of thirteen women who were found suffocated inside a shipping container. As they attempt to identify the Jane Does, the police interpret every object found on the women, and, by a seeming stroke of luck, recover a passport that reveals at least one of the women as a citizen of *Magyarország*. Yet this discovery does not even begin to unravel the mystery of the women's origin: indeed, in the shot where we briefly glimpse the name of the country, we also see the police officer in a continued state of disorientation, none the wiser about who the women are. *Magyarország*, Hungary, remains unreadable – a cipher signalling merely the absence of an identity, even in the act of naming that very identity.

I take this figure as a guiding metaphor for the positionality of Eastern Europe in the contemporary imagination as neither properly East nor properly West, an in-between space that ultimately slips out of signification. More specifically, I argue that Eastern Europe as a region and as a conceptual entity reveals the East-West binary to be so strongly operative in contemporary popular and academic geopolitical imaginaries that any liminal position risks wholesale discursive erasure. This is how Eastern Europe falls between the cracks: while popular discourse avowedly admits the region into the community of Europe, at the same time it is also seen as somehow not really European. In academic geopolitical imaginaries, too, postcolonial theory leaves the region no space for representation: while it is certainly excluded from conceptualisations of the colonised 'East', its inclusion in general notions of the colonising 'West' is never more than implicit, since the referents to terms such as 'the West', 'coloniser', 'metropole', or 'colonial centre' are rarely, if ever, Eastern European. Indeed, Eastern Europe's colonial history, which involves both colonising enterprises

© 2023 The Authors. Critical Quarterly published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

and colonisation by various empires, is far more complicated than the binary admits, but this has seldom brought about sustained efforts to re-examine the binary itself. Instead, being neither clearly coloniser or colonised, Eastern Europe simply drops out of consideration altogether.

This article looks into the binary thinking that leads to the ultimate erasure of Eastern Europe both from popular discourse and from academic, specifically postcolonial, imaginations. I argue that Eastern European histories and contemporary identifications disallow the binarisms of West and East, centre and periphery, metropole and province, Global North and Global South. Therefore, Eastern Europe presents us with a powerful opportunity to rethink these binaries and challenge the effects they have on constructing our social world.

Of course, in saying that, it is important to recognise that there is no such thing as 'the' – singular – imagination. Yet, there are trends both within academia and discourse more broadly speaking, and within these trends there are also some people who have more weight in shaping what a particular discourse looks like and some who have less. It is possible and also necessary to describe such trends; even if, admittedly, the act of describing them inevitably risks oversimplification. In saying 'the contemporary imagination', then, I aim to describe what I argue is a tendency in much contemporary conceptualisation of the world, a tendency that we can understand as led by Western discursive centres and practices, but which is not exclusive to the West as a spatial region.

It has not always been the case that Eastern Europe was understood as a region apart from what this special issue calls 'core Europe'; indeed, even the designation 'Eastern Europe' is a product of recent history, which serves to name the region as an entity and an identity in the ontological sense. Historically, Eastern European lands and people have occupied similar positions within the imagination of European collectivity as have other Europeans. One can find such views reflected in political writings as well as in literature. Among the latter, paradigmatic examples include Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, in which characters leave England for travels to places such as (what is now) Italy along with (what is now) Slovakia, or in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, one of whose main characters, Leopold Bloom, is a Hungarian Jew. To pursue the Hungarian example further, even in hallmarks of American literature, set in the United States, we can see evidence for an American cultural understanding of Hungarianness as not inherently other: in both Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Henry James's *The Bostonians*, Hungarians struggling to free themselves from Habsburg rule represent to Americans the European analogy to their own enslaved African American population. I do not mean to suggest that the Hungarian

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

revolution of 1848-9 resembled the fight against American slavery, but the fact that to American abolitionists it seemed that way is telling about the imaginaries of Westerners even as far away as the United States – an imaginary in which the revolutionary efforts of Eastern Europeans such as Lajos Kossuth in Hungary and Tadeusz Kościuszko in Poland were simply part and parcel of the liberation struggles of the day.

Today's culturally dominant perceptions reflect a different view, one in which Eastern Europe is not clearly, or at all, part of the collectivities of Europe or the West. Rather, in spite of its own internally different histories, the region is regarded as somehow uniformly different: 'Eastern Europe' has become a label and identity that is understood to set countries as disparate as the Czech Republic, Albania, and Ukraine apart from the rest of Europe. This culturally dominant view is produced on the one hand through popular culture, in which the period after 1989-90 has seen an increasing normativisation of America-centric conceptions of society, community, the individual, and the good life. On the other hand, postcolonial theory, a promising and productive alternative to Western-centric historiography and understandings of the global social order, has not adequately integrated into its geopolitical vision a region whose historical and contemporary experience does not align with that of either the Western coloniser or the Eastern colonised.

This essay elucidates the liminal positionality of Eastern Europe and argues that a serious consideration of the effects of that positionality allows us, indeed compels us, to rethink contemporary geopolitical imaginaries through a multipolar lens that challenges the binary elements of postcolonial discourse. I begin with a brief consideration of how the theoretical enterprise to decentre the West has neglected to account for the liminality of the neither-East-nor-West. I then turn to two Hungarian examples as case studies of Eastern European articulations of the liminal identity between East and West: first in acclaimed author Péter Nádas's novel *Parallel Stories (Párhuzamos történetek)* and then in a speech by Hungary's far-right prime minister Viktor Orbán at Băile Tuşnad in July of 2022. These examples show that the patterns of discursive erasure have centralised for Hungarian identity the tension of whether Hungarians belong to Europe or not, in ways that are strikingly similar across the left and right ends of the political spectrum, although with radically different consequences. In other words, the erasure of Eastern Europe is not merely a matter of theory; it is productive of politically powerful affects – of alienation on the one hand, and of national-chauvinistic violence on the other.

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Europe's Provinces: Eastern Europe as Impossible Space

In some sense, for the West, Eastern Europe does not exist. Not only does it not figure as part of core Europe's imaginary of Europe, but this erasure itself is not recognised. We can think of this double erasure as on its first level a colonial one, in which a certain region and its people are characterised as lesser than 'us', while the second level depends on the obscuring of these relations. László Kürti delineates the first level when he argues that the European reunification project of the 1990s fundamentally depended on characterising the East as backward in order for the terms of reunification to be dictated by the West. Scholars have recognised that this 'backwardness project'[1] 'trap[s]' Eastern Europeans in 'schemata of projected or assumed cultural inferiority', as Marta Figlerowicz points out in relation to Poland in this issue; Agnes Gagyi has made similar claims about Hungarian self-perceptions.[2] Yet, the project itself is rarely understood in the terms in which Kürti reads it, namely as 'akin to the orientalizing project'.[3] His framework is helpful for understanding the discursive dynamics through which Eastern European people, including residents of the former German Democratic Republic, are constituted as less developed – democratically less mature, economically less independent – than their Western counterparts. Like the project of Orientalism, the backwardness project is not a centralised or planned directive: it is a scattered, subconscious, and discursive effort, but – like Orientalism – its aims are ultimately those of domination, whether through the exclusion of certain people from the status of full subjecthood, or, as was the case in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, through the incursion of Western business interests, justified by a supposed lack of economic expertise in the region.

But Kürti's analysis stands alone as one of the rare examples of a serious attempt to draw out the colonial dynamics of the discourses on Eastern Europe; indeed, the paucity of such analyses evidences the success of the second level of erasure, through which such dynamics are hidden out of sight. Even to Eastern European academics, postcolonial theory rarely appears as a suitable analytical framework, and when it does, it does so almost exclusively in the context of a supposed colonial relation to the Soviet Union. In the case of Hungary, this tendency might derive from a strong popular discursive effort to place Soviet occupation foremost among the many other occupations that could qualify as candidates for colonial incursion – the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, the Third Reich; academic inquiry might subconsciously mirror the popular imaginary in this regard. Magdalena Marsovszky, in her reading of the discourse of 'folk nationalism' (*Volksnationalismus*),

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

highlights how this imaginary works to channel every notion of colonial occupation through the Soviet Union. Marsovszky suggests that Hungarian folk nationalism frames its resentment of the European Union by transferring anticolonial sentiments from Moscow to 'Brussels' (Marsovszky 118).[4] But Marsovszky's analysis, even as it draws out the singular imaginary position of the USSR, replicates the elision of other sources of what she calls 'postcolonial trauma'. And while a few works are now in existence exploring the colonial histories of the region, such as Ivan Kalmar's work on 'Eastern Europeanism' and Clemens Ruthner's on the Habsburg Empire (Kalmar; Ruthner),[5] by and large, even Eastern European scholarship struggles to recognise or analyse the colonial dynamics that animate so much of the discourse on Eastern Europe.

One reason for this paucity is the absence of Eastern Europe within the larger body of postcolonial theory, an absence that is especially puzzling in theoretical projects that aim precisely to deconstruct what Dipesh Chakrabarty has aptly termed 'hyperreal Europe', the ideal image of Europe as represented by the coloniser.[6] The project that constitutes the most direct challenge to this 'hyperreal Europe', Chakrabarty's book *Provincializing Europe*, is also a succinct example of the theoretical disregard for Eastern Europe. For Chakrabarty, the project of provincialising Europe consists of dismantling 'hyperreal Europe', which Chakrabarty describes elsewhere as a 'version of "Europe," reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships as the scene of the birth of the modern'.[7] This Europe arbitrates for itself the notions of modernity as well as history; it is therefore always the subject of history as such, with subaltern histories relegated to the 'waiting rooms of history' until they can be made to conform to the 'European' narrative. Therefore, postcolonial historiography necessitates a challenge to hyperreal Europe and its history, which in turn requires regarding Europe itself as provincial, not central. Clearly, this project to provincialise Europe could benefit from demonstrating how Europe is *already internally provincialised*, yet Chakrabarty never does so. In fact, Eastern European countries rarely show up in the book. Even in his overt acknowledgement of how '[t]his Europe, like "the West," is […] an imaginary entity' towering over the reality of 'multiple Europes', the only internal differences among these multiple Europes in the book are between countries such as Portugal and Spain on the one hand and England and France on the other.[8]

Therefore, although Chakrabarty's problem is with the exclusions of historiography, he does not make space for a multifocal approach to what is being excluded. Even though it could be expedient for his

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

project, he does not account for how his 'certain version of Europe' is delineated in opposition not merely to 'the third world' but also to Eastern Europe – unless, of course, we understand what Chakrabarty calls 'the non-West' as including Eastern Europe, but this is a possibility that Chakrabarty never makes a provision for. When Chakrabarty writes that '[f]rom Mandel to Jameson, nobody sees "late capitalism" as a system whose driving engine may be in the third world', one might equally well ask whether there is anybody who would seriously think of the driving engine of late capitalism as being in Serbia, Albania, Hungary, or Romania. On these grounds, then, Eastern Europe lies, like Chakrabarty's 'non-West', outside of history. And if we believe Chakrabarty that '[h]istoricism', Europe's arbitration of the role of subject of history, thus 'posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West', then Eastern Europe would necessarily have to be considered non-West, because the 'historical time' elapsing between events 'in institutional development' (the industrial revolution, etc.) in Western Europe and their occurrence in Eastern Europe would necessarily imply a 'cultural distance'.[9]

Given these considerations, it is difficult to explain why Chakrabarty does not admit of these theoretical possibilities even in passing. But whatever the reason, this omission works to solidify a geopolitical framework that, while it seeks to destabilise the position of a certain Europe, does not allow for any nuance between the poles of West and non-West – a binary conceptualisation that ultimately buttresses the very notion of a unified Europe that it seeks to dismantle.

Parallel Stories: European Book, Non-European Characters

At first, it might seem that Péter Nádas's novel *Parallel Stories* has little to do with any of this. In fact, this sprawling book of some 1800 pages, with very loosely if at all connected characters moving in and out of view, scattered across European locales and history, seems resistant not just to such an interpretation but to interpretation as such. Yet I argue that this intricate tapestry of events, spaces, and people acts as a silent response to a prominent tradition in Hungarian literature in which the West stands as the unattainable object of desire and identification. Nádas's novel sidesteps this desire by portraying Hungarian belonging in Europe as a *fait accompli*; at the same time, it also depicts Hungarian locales as having idiosyncratic characteristics different from 'Europe' and no deterministic connections to other places. That is, Hungary is inherently Europe and not Europe at the same time.

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

The literary, and indeed political, tradition to which I allude above can be traced back to Hungary's history of colonisation by two different empires: first the Ottoman Empire in 1526, and subsequently by the Habsburgs in 1686. Through these shifting occupations, the desirability and reality of belonging to East or West became a constant preoccupation. After the defeat of the emancipatory struggles against the Habsburg Empire in 1848-9 and Hungary's subsequent inclusion in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867, being European meant – in 1849, explicitly, in 1867, implicitly – granting primacy to ideals emanating from the Habsburg court. Post 1867, then, expressions of resistance to foreign rule sought for ways to distance Hungarianness from the more Central European culture of the Habsburg court by emphasising Hungarians' Central Asian origin. This effort manifested itself in cultural and academic endeavours to find or create 'Oriental' connections in history, language, and the arts. Sensing the dangers of nascent nationalism, many of the country's literary and intellectual circles resisted this orientation towards the East: associating instead with the literature, arts, and philosophy of Western Europe, these circles ultimately coalesced around a Hungarian modernism centred on the literary journal *Nyugat*, founded in 1908, whose title literally means 'the West'. *Nyugat*, which is generally regarded as Hungarian literary history's single most important journal or group, eventually found itself confronted with a counter-journal: *Napkelet*, founded in 1923 and whose title means 'sunrise' or 'the East', marked the emergence of the national-chauvinistic project of isolating Hungary from the cultural world of Europe. While this is an overgeneralised account, it is nonetheless sufficient to highlight how Hungarian culture polarised around the ideas of belonging to either East or West, with leftist thinkers, writers, and artists generally stressing kinship with Europe, and national-chauvinistic projects emphasising a unique, Asian Hungarian character.

Today, Hungarian writers typically side with the heritage of *Nyugat*; and, like much of the literary output associated with the journal, contemporary texts often portray the desire for the West as a complicated, tortured one, sparked by the recognition of Western superiority and Hungarian backwardness. It is in this context that I argue that *Parallel Stories* can be understood as a project that attempts to cut out the longing for belonging to the West by portraying Hungarianness as *both* self-evidently European and unique, separate from a pan-European story – a portrayal that creates a striking separation between the novel itself and its Hungarian characters.

One way that the novel articulates this tension is through its treatment of spatial scale. On the one hand, *Parallel Stories* places

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Hungary and Hungarians firmly within the sphere of Europe: with bold self-evidence, it opens in Berlin for a chapter where a dead man's body is found. The novel never identifies who this man was, and the chapter does not connect to what follows, so its sole function appears to be to establish the setting as, initially, German. This is how the novel sets the stage for what German literary critic Joachim Sartorius calls its European 'Schauplatz' (theatre or scene), a setting imbued with a horizon that spans far beyond the local to encompass all of Europe.[10] The rest of the novel alternates between settings all over the continent. Neither are all of the protagonists Hungarians; despite the presence of some Hungarian characters in most of the novel's chapters, some focalising figures are German, for example, the detective Dr Kienast or the eugenicist Otmar Freiherr von der Schuer. This gesture pushes the novel beyond the scope of national literature and inscribes it into something like a European literary imaginary. Indeed, Lilla Balint has argued that most of Nádas's oeuvre shares this striving for inclusion in a pan-European literature – an inclusion that always remains contentious for writers from the periphery, even as it is taken for granted as a matter of course for French or German authors.[11]

Yet, for all its vast scale, *Parallel Stories* at times still feels as if what really matters takes place in, or is processed in, Hungary, which produces the sense that for all the vectors in which the stories of Hungarians intersect with other European stories, ultimately Hungarians are still left alone, stuck outside of historical time, watching Europe as if from the sidelines. If the Hungarian author thus has a claim to the literary space of Europe, that access seems much more problematic for his characters, who inhabit what one might presume to be a much more typical experience for an average Hungarian. Thus, the novel occupies both spaces at once: that of the metropole of European literary culture and that of the periphery, relegated to the waiting rooms of history.

Many characters embody this tension but perhaps none more so than the architect Alajos Madzar, a Hungarian of German ethnicity whose name, ironically, does not sound German at all but is instead a common Slavic word for 'Hungarian', *magyar*. This makes Alajos Madzar a doubly displaced character. His name and his ethnic background already hint at the ways in which Madzar stands in for the idea of Hungarianness as a trap outside of concrete or whole identities, a 'not quite' anything – and this in spite of his prestigious international education and seemingly stellar prospects.

Madzar first appears in the novel as the intended architect for the renovation project of the apartment of Mrs Szemző, the Jewish psychoanalyst whose major objective is to treat traumatised Hungarian

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Jews. A student of one of the world's most famous architects, Mies van der Rohe, Madzar studied in Rotterdam in the modernist architectural style and is planning to launch a career in the United States. To Mrs Szemző, he therefore represents the idea of breaking free of the shackles of Hungarian soil and history by cleaning away the fallacious decorations of the bourgeois apartment in order to bring in a new, modern world. As they discuss the renovation project – which actually proves more difficult than anticipated, because the very foundations of the apartment seem to resist the spiritual rebirth both characters desire – Mrs Szemző and Madzar develop an erotic attraction founded on their shared ambitions to purge away the constraints of Hungarian tradition. Mrs Szemző, many of whose wealthy family have emigrated, is somehow herself unable to break loose from Hungary, and she sees in Madzar the desired but unattainable ability to cut the ties of origin: 'This man is not bound by his origin to such a tight familial and tribal web, which clearly does not let go of her or does not let her stray so far at least'.[12] Mrs Szemző, then, is drawn to Madzar because of her desire for the ability to transcend Hungary as the scene of her life – an ability that she feels she lacks utterly, even though it was clearly not out of reach for large portions of her family.

But if Madzar appears to Mrs Szemző as the epitome of the gleaming potential to outgrow Hungary, things look very different from Madzar's point of view. Firstly, his 'American dream', as this chapter is called, seems to be in a constant state of deferral: although his emigration is treated by the characters as a fixed plan, it never materialises within the novel. Indeed, in spite of his many international connections, we never see Madzar in either Rotterdam or any other non-Hungarian place: the majority of the text devoted to him is set in his rural hometown Mohács, or on board a steamer headed there from Budapest. Neither is Mohács simply a country town: for Hungarians, it is eponymous with the lost battle of 1526 against the Ottomans that took place there and which marked the definite end of an independent Hungarian nation. Madzar's actual existence, then, as we see it in the novel, stands in stark contrast to Mrs Szemző's fantasies of him: he is very much bound to Hungary, and not merely to any Hungary but to a rural and peripheral one, one marked by an outside empire.

Indeed, many of Madzar's preoccupations in the novel centre on his feeling stuck in his provincial existence, and clinging, with what feels like increasing despair, to his dreams of escape. Mohács, Madzar feels, stands outside of time: 'Since his return it is not the first time that he feels that, in this place of his birth, time stopped at some point, lazily', and in observing Mohács residents, he feels like he is seeing, 'with deep

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

dread', 'various versions of himself in his own stalled future'. His only response to these visions is an emphatic 'így ne', *not this*: he feels that 'if he stayed, he could not possibly have a different fate, there is no skill with which he could avoid it'. Thus, Madzar's 'American dream' really is a dream of escaping what he at one point thinks is 'this damned province', in which he sees no promise or life.

But Madzar's panic about Hungarian existence is not simply a critique of rural life: it is a paranoid imaginary in which Hungarian life, even private life, is *a priori* hopeless. In a chapter in which Madzar's friend Bellardi makes the chapter's titular claim that 'All Hungarians are lost', Madzar comes up with less and less convincing explanations for why he is not, or not really Hungarian:

> It is possible that Bellardi really is a lost man, but that doesn't mean that I am a lost man, why would I be. He fought against the thought, protested against it, that all Hungarians would be lost, as Bellardi had claimed. Meanwhile he felt, on his tongue, in his throat, on the roof of his mouth, the dense taste and smell of the Danube sand. These Hungarians think, at least, that they are lost, because the Turks took their kingdom. But I am me, nothing more. If I leave here, he thought, then I can end this misery at least within myself.

Madzar's internal struggle highlights only the extent to which he is deeply touched by, and cannot extricate himself from, Bellardi's claim – especially because his own feelings of a stalled time, as well as both his and Bellardi's misfortunes with women, seem to confirm that all of them are bound to meander aimlessly, without direction or companionship. Even as Madzar tries to distance himself from 'these Hungarians', reminding Bellardi of his German background, the narrator asserts that Hungarianness is nonetheless Madzar's strongest identification: 'for some strange reason, he really felt deeply Hungarian. Deeper and more Hungarian than all those who clamoured about it around him'. Indeed, when Madzar tries unsuccessfully to read one of Mrs Szemző's favourite books, Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, he understands his failure as coming from his inability to transcend his hometown: he thinks, with despair, that '[h]e carries Mohács with him'.

Madzar, then, may represent to Mrs Szemző the promise of a new life, of a break with Hungarian nothingness, but to Madzar himself it appears that he is unable to insert himself into historical time and realise a forward motion and a story, because – in spite of his international studies and firm plan to follow Mies van der Rohe to America – he is

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

somehow nonetheless stuck in the sands of the Danube, unable to fully extricate himself from its circles. Indeed, reading Thomas Mann grants neither him nor Mrs Szemző the ability to actually write themselves out of Hungarian history and into a pan-European one. While *Parallel Stories* positions itself as self-evidently part of European literature, that position is not granted to its characters, no matter their many links, be they literary or architectural, to the West. Their identities remain somehow mired in a Hungarianness that is forever outside of history, forever but a province, and fatally isolated from the main currents of life itself.

Orbán: Laying Claim to Europe

If Nádas's work aims to write itself into European literature *and* yet deal with the uniqueness of Hungarian locality, this is not so surprising, given the European attachments of Hungary's literary and artistic culture. What is more surprising is that a similar tension is discernible in the political ideology put forward by Hungary's far-right prime minister Viktor Orbán. During the 2010s, Orbán's relationship to the rest of Europe, and especially the European Union, became increasingly fraught, which partially explains why he has sought allies elsewhere – primarily in Russia, China, and the Middle East. Yet, what remains a curiously strong presence in Orbán's ideology is the insistence on Hungary's Europeanness, a Europeanness that is at times justified on cultural, at times on racial, terms.

Inheritor of the Eastern orientations of *Napkelet* and associated circles, right-wing nationalism in Hungary is caught in a strange duality, where the notion of Hungarians as essentially Asian – descendants of a pagan horse-riding nomadic people – stands in stark contrast with the image of Hungarians as Christians, members of a distinct European cultural and historical tradition. Nationalist politicians have tended to navigate between these two poles. Orbán, too, animates the two sides of this duality according to the exigencies of his particular goals. For example, the migration crisis saw Orbán buttressing Hungary's image as a heroic defender of Christianity and the West against the invasion of barbaric Others, which justified the erection of a wall on the country's borders. On the other hand, the notion of Hungarians as Asians and as pagans can also be a convenient tool for emphasising the country's uniqueness vis-à-vis Europe in situations where Orbán seeks to distance the country from the EU. Thus, for example, Marsovszky argues that it is what she calls neo-paganism that wins out over Christianity in the preamble of Hungary's new constitution, laid down by the Orbán regime in the first days of their 2010 mandate: 'although Christian values are

also emphasised, the constitution is ultimately not Christian as much as "folk" and pagan: it reveres not a universal god but a specific divinity, the nation'.[13]

It is in this context that Orbán's 2022 Băile Tuşnad speech becomes meaningful as a turning point in Hungarian national-chauvinistic discourse that responds to the West's discursive articulation of itself: Hungary is here not so much Christian or pagan as it is the only true West. In the speech, Orbán attempts to articulate a new geopolitical vision in which he sees the West as in decline – due to an incoherent amalgam of socio-cultural changes and a reallocation of resources – and positions Hungary as setting itself apart from this global crisis as a 'local exception'. But whereas such a distancing move might in the past have led the likes of Orbán to buttress again the neo-pagan image of Hungarianness in opposition to Christian Europe, Orbán takes a different tack. Identifying 'demographic decline', 'migration', and 'the gender question' as the three most serious threats to European civilisation, Orbán makes the claim that its responses to these challenges have effectively deprived core Europe of its Europeanness, so that the racist, xenophobic, and homophobic policies of countries like Hungary have now vested these countries with what remains of Europeanness as a civilisational project. In Orbán's words:

> Migration has divided Europe in two. I could also say that the West has split into two. One half is a world in which European and non-European peoples live together. These countries are no longer nations. These countries are nothing but the conglomerates of people. I could also say that this is no longer the West, but a post-West …. And here is Europe, that is, the other half of the West, this Central Europe, that's us. I could also say, if it wasn't a bit messy to say, that the West has in spirit moved to Central Europe. The West is here, while over there what remains is merely a post-West.[14]

Orbán goes on to say that 'there is an ongoing battle between these two halves of Europe': 'Brussels, augmented with the troops of Soros, intends plain and simple to hoist the migrants upon us'. In sum, they 'continue to wage war against Central Europe with the goal to transform us to be like them'. The military register is neither new nor surprising: what we can see play out here is what Marsovszky describes as the transposing of the image of the aggressive imperialist from Moscow to Brussels, so that the European Union's efforts to coordinate the handling of the refugee crisis can be made to appear like military occupation

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

and coercion. What is new, though, is how Orbán positions Hungary and Eastern Europe (what he deliberately and consistently, in this speech at least, calls 'Central Europe') as stalwart bastions of Europeanness and Westernness – in spite of Europe and the West. That is, while the Christian imagery of Hungary emphasised the commonality of the Western project in opposition to the perceived barbaric invaders, and while the neo-pagan image pits wild Asian-Hungarians against soft Europeans, Orbán's invention of the post-West now positions Hungarians *as both* in stark opposition to Europe while at the same time being its only true heirs.

What is striking about this new conceptualisation is that it continues to cling to the idea of Hungarian Europeanness in spite of the fact that this does not seem expedient given Orbán's ever more embittered relationship with European political leaders. Arguably, Orbán would benefit from positing an inherent difference between Hungarians and other Europeans, and using this difference to justify his imagery of a continent at war. Yet he sets up another essentialism instead: in contrast with what he openly calls a 'mixed-race world', where 'European peoples mix with those arriving from outside of Europe', Hungarians 'are simply the mix of peoples living in their own European home' and 'creating an own, new European culture'. Apart from how historically erroneous this conceptualisation is, it is noteworthy how insistently Orbán clamours to depict Hungarians as intrinsically, inalienably European – by virtue of their pure racial history. The Europeanness of Hungarians thus becomes a fact of nature, and its naturalness is given as a guarantee against those European discourses that wish to talk it away. Faced with both increasing alienation from his European colleagues and the discourse that denies Hungary membership within Europe, Orbán chooses a rhetoric that counters discursive erasure through an insistence on supposedly natural (that is, racial) facts.

But in response to the dynamics of exclusion, Orbán could have mobilised the image of Hungarians as Asians, and insisted on that as a natural fact. Why is the idea of Europe so important for Orbán to uphold as a core tenet of Hungarian identity, especially considering his violent opposition to, indeed, hatred of, everything coming out of Western Europe – particularly its supposed tolerance of racial and sexual minorities? Because this speech is not merely a tool for ideological indoctrination; it also wants to provide a vision that Hungarians will find appealing. The speech therefore suggests that Orbán thinks it too politically costly to discard the image of Europe from Hungarian understandings of the self. In his curious contortions to produce the idea of a post-West we can discern just how central Europeanness is to

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Hungarian identity – even for Orbán's core audience, who are presumably not the country's most fervent Europe supporters. Europe matters to Hungarians – even to those who do wish to see themselves as different from their more tolerant Western European counterparts. Discursively, Europe continues to play the role for Hungarians that it does for Indians in Chakrabarty's framework – that of centre, the model of the modern, and the subject of history.

That in Orbán's speech Europe matters, or the idea of Europe matters, in Orbán's speech speaks volumes about the prestige that the project of Europe still has in people's minds. It is in this context that the discursive erasure of Eastern Europe gains specific practical importance: if the European project is both central to identity and subject of desire, then the continued experience of exclusion cannot fail to produce at best alienation and at worst anger and aggression. This situation only plays into the hands of the far right by justifying an increasingly isolationist, chauvinist politics. And while literature can thrive on ambiguity, as *Parallel Stories* does, popular sentiment can rarely accommodate such in-between positions, especially in an environment where neither common nor academic imaginaries provide a geopolitical vision that enables non-binary positionalities. Hungarians thus find themselves in a situation where exclusion from Europe necessarily promotes the other powerful identity discourse available – that of far-right national chauvinism.

Conclusion: The Empire of the Binary

Of course, Orbán's vision of a European or Western empire that, aided by the minions of György Soros, seeks to destroy the racially and sexually pure countries of Eastern Europe is entirely absurd. There is no imperial centre in Brussels that would dream of colonising Hungary and depriving it of its autonomy and uniqueness. But even so, in the heads of Europeans and Westerners more generally, including academics who have made it their profession to theorise the concepts of centre and periphery, Hungary and Eastern Europe continue to appear as inferior, backward, or simply invisible – only very ambiguously part of Europe, yet also not clearly anything else. If postcolonial theory has helped articulate a subject position from which the subaltern may come to speak, that position remains inaccessible to Eastern European subjectivities; the latter are relegated to the periphery when it comes to understandings of what Europe is, but this relegation does not come with the subaltern's associated possibilities to write back to the (discursive) empire.

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Perhaps this omission of Eastern Europe from frameworks of intelligibility within a postcolonial vision is simply an oversight, arising from the insignificance of the region (though insignificance is of course never a neutral assessment). But perhaps there are those who benefit from an all too binary centre-periphery framework thanks to which Eastern Europe simply drops out of the picture. Resistance depends on the recognition of imperial dispossession; if, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe was the target of economic imperialism by American and Western European businesses, then these would certainly benefit from keeping these dynamics hidden. Any suspicion towards them can thus be coded as expressions not of anti-imperialist resistance, but of a (potentially racialised) backwardness that fails to recognise in these business interventions its own good. I do not have space here to delve into this possibility at length, so I advance it as a question for further consideration. But even if we momentarily accept this hypothesis, it still remains puzzling why postcolonial thinkers from other positionalities such as India or the Middle East have likewise been resistant to a less binary framework that would be able to accommodate liminal spaces such as Eastern Europe.

This oversight signals a weakness in postcolonial theory, whose investment in articulating frameworks of expression for colonised subjects has given rise to binaries which have over time become too rigid. Imperial power has never been simple or straightforward, and although countering it may at times require resorting to essentialism, ultimately it is colonising dynamics that benefit from too binary conceptualisations that obscure the subtle and intricate workings of imperialist logics, discursive and otherwise, the world over. Eastern Europe vividly embodies the shortcomings of the centre-periphery binary, which, if not corrected, risks bringing disastrous consequences exactly for those Eastern Europeans who share in the progressive ideals of other parts of Europe and the West. But Eastern Europe is arguably not the only region that challenges binary conceptualisations of centre-periphery, West-East, and coloniser-colonised. For a truly global postcolonial vision, both in critical theory and in popular discourse, we need to propose new frameworks that can accommodate many more shades and dimensions than that of the binary. Ultimately, the binary does not serve us: it merely serves to affirm hierarchies and ensure the concentration of power with those who already have it.

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Notes

1 László Kürti, 'Globalisation and the Discourse of "Otherness" in the "New" Eastern and Central Europe', in *The Politics of Multiculturalism in New Europe: Racism, Identity and Community*, ed. Tariq Modood and Pnina Werbner (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997), 29-53; 31.

2 Agnes Gagyi, '"Coloniality of Power" in East Central Europe: External Penetration as Internal Force in Post-Socialist Hungarian Politics', *Journal of World System Research*, 22:2 (2016), 349–72; 351, 358.

3 Kürti, 'Globalisation and the Discourse of "Otherness"', 31.

4 Magdalena Marsovszky, '"Wir Verteidigen Das Magyarentum!": Völkischer Ethnonationalismus, Ethnopluralismus, die Ideologie der Neuen Rechten und das neue Grundgesetz Ungarns', in *Neue Alte Rassismen?: Differenz Und Exklusion in Europa Nach 1989*, ed. Gesine Drews-Sylla and Renata Makarska (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015), 103-32; 118. All translations are my own.

5 See Ivan Kalmar, '"The Battlefield Is in Brussels": Islamophobia in the Visegrád Four in Its Global Context', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 52:5 (2018), 406–19; Clemens Ruthner, 'Central Europe Goes Postcolonial: New Approaches to the Habsburg Empire Around 1900', *Cultural Studies*, 16:6 (2002), 877–83.

6 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'In Defense of *Provincializing Europe*: A Response to Carola Dietze', *History & Theory*, 47:1 (2008), 85-96; 87.

7 Ibid.

8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 43, 16-17.

9 Ibid., 7.

10 Joachim Sartorius, 'Das Gewicht des Körpers', *der Freitag*, 20 February 2012; https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/das-gewicht-des-korpers (accessed 10 January 2023).

11 Lilla Balint, 'Transnational Strategies and Jewish Writing: Péter Nádas's Parallel Stories as a European Novel', *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies*, 5:1 (2018), 231-46; 233

12 Péter Nádas, *Párhuzamos Történetek* (Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 2011), https://reader.dia.hu/document/Nadas_Peter-Parhuzamos_tortenetek-1096 (accessed 9 January 2023). All the quotes in this section are taken from this electronic edition, in my translation.

13 Marsovszky, 'Wir Verteidigen Das Magyarentum!', 122.

14 Viktor Orbán, 'Orbán Viktor Előadása a XXXI. Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem es Diáktáborban', Băile Tuşnad, 23 July 2023; https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-eloadasa-a-xxxi-balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktaborban/ (accessed 15 February 2023). All translations from the speech in this section are mine.

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Author Biography

Daniella Gáti (he/she/they) is lecturer of games and interactive media at the University of Salford. Their work examines digital cultures in a transnational context, paying special attention to how algorithmic architectures shape social formations, discourses, and identities. Ongoing projects including an analysis of the Chinese internet landscape as an appeal to diversifying current understandings of "the" internet, as well as an examination of the relationship between queerness and digital architectures. Their writings have appeared in *Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, *Information and Culture*, and *The Faulkner Journal*.

14678705, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12746 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [25/09/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License