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Making and Unmaking Socialist Modernities: Seven Interventions into the Writing of Contemporary History on Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract: *The historiography on post-war Central and Eastern Europe has proven highly productive in recent years and challenges many received assumptions about state Socialism that prevail in both Western and regional scholarship and the societal representation of this history. This essay enquires into the making and unmaking of state Socialism, discusses recent and innovative scholarship, and claims that the analysis of post-war Central and Eastern Europe provides useful methodological insights beyond the region and the specific time frame. In seven interventions, the essay calls for the situational, flexible, and de-centred study of Central and Eastern Europe beyond the constrictions of methodological nationalism and Cold War epistemology and with an emphasis on the processual character of modernity. In consequence, it is held that we need to perceive state Socialism as integral to the multiplicity of modernities and should integrate Central and Eastern Europe into European and global history.*

Nearly 30 years after the end of state Socialism in Eastern Europe and around much of the globe, the historiography on Central and Eastern Europe faces considerable challenges when dealing with the most recent past. Studying the prehistory of our present contributes to public and political discourse and illuminates the problems of present-day society.¹ However, in recent years, popular discourse, memory policies, legislation and a significant number of historians in Poland, Hungary, or the Czech Republic have replaced a reflexive approach with the affirmation of historical truth and national history. In fact, historiography about these countries and post-Socialist countries more generally is divided, first, between a historicist approach that employs methodological

¹ Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael: *Nach dem Boom. Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*. Göttingen 2012.

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nationalism and focuses on the political history of state Socialism and, second, scholars with a background in social and cultural history who study social, cultural, and ideological change and relate Central and Eastern Europe to global post-war history.² The latter approach provides intriguing insights that question received assumptions of Socialism and understands state Socialism as a contingent historical process. From a methodological point of view, this also helps to reflect contemporary history more generally and allows moving historiography beyond the received geographical containers of Central and Eastern European history and the findings of Cold War social sciences and early historiography.³

This article seeks to chart this dynamic field of research on the decades of state Socialism and brings forward seven interventions to rethink the contemporary history on Central and Eastern Europe. I will discuss recent, Western as well as Central and Eastern European, scholarship, present its findings and address its added interpretative value. I argue for a postmodern and transnational approach that goes beyond political history and helps to challenge the temporal, geographical, and methodological frameworks within which Central and Eastern European history has usually been written. This means to stress the legacy of the Second World War for post-war history, to apply a situational and flexible definition of Central and Eastern Europe, and emphasise history across borders. In place of the current research interest in power and violence, I would suggest studying the making and unmaking of state Socialism as inspired by Stephen Kotkin's concept of "Socialism as a civilisation" and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's claim of "multiple modernities".⁴ In conclusion, I will discuss the trajectories of such a contemporary history of Central and Eastern Europe and relate it to general European and global history.

Historiography usually tends to present the decades of state Socialism in Central and Eastern Europe as a period of violence and oppression, to be followed by a period of radical historical change. Much of the literature emphasises national histories of heroism and victimhood, usually with a bias towards externalising the roots of violence and oppression to Communist or Socialist

² For an introduction into this field, see Alexander Nützenadel and Wolfgang Schieder (eds.): *Zeitgeschichte als Problem. Nationale Traditionen und Perspektiven*, in: *Europa*. Göttingen 2004; Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor (eds.): *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in post-communist Eastern Europe*. Budapest 2007.

³ For a further discussion, see the recent review section in *Contemporary European History*: Celia Donert, Emily Greble and Jessica Wardhaugh: *New Scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe*, in: *Contemporary European History* 26 (2017), 507.

⁴ Stephen Kotkin: *Magnetic mountain. Stalinism as a civilization*. Berkeley, CA 1997; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt: *Multiple Modernities*, in: *Daedalus* 129 (2000), 1–29.

ideology.⁵ Often following the paradigm of totalitarianism this research suggests a clear-cut opposition of “the state against society”⁶ and frames Communism as an ideology imported from the Soviet Union lacking significant societal recognition. Two traumas, mass murder and totalitarian rule, are the main foci of the various state-financed institutes for the study of authoritarian rule in the region. For instance, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance investigates “Crimes against the Polish Nation” between 1939 and 1989 and the nation’s “Struggle and Martyrdom”, combining historical research with juridical prosecution and public education.⁷ As the institutes in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries employ a significant research staff, administer relevant archives, and in some cases run well-established publishing houses, they effectively shape research agendas in contemporary history and public opinion about the recent past of these countries.

In contrast to this history of externally imposed violence and oppression, the radical political change around 1989 towards democracy seems to offer a more positive outlook. Hailed by contemporaries as the “hard road to freedom”, a “return to diversity”, or even the “end of history”,⁸ such liberal narratives have however been severely criticised by conservative historians. For instance, Antoni Dudek’s *Regulated Revolution* points to the negotiated character of Poland’s regime change and questions the extent and depth of transition from Communism to democracy.⁹ More radically, in recent years, populist and conservative governments such as Viktor Orbán’s in Hungary or the second PiS government in Poland claim the continuity of Communist personnel and influence beyond 1989, presenting their own administration as the real and thorough

5 As the Soviet styled regimes in Central and Eastern Europe mostly referred to Socialism, I mostly use this term. The difference, however, is only gradual.

6 Grzegorz Ekiert: *The State against Society. Political Crises and their Aftermath in East Central Europe*. Princeton 1996.

7 Both quotes represent departments of the Polish IPN, but the institute’s research agenda intensively reflects political changes and dynamics of Poland’s policy of history. For an overview over the different institutes, see Michal Kopeček: In Search of “National Memory”. The Politics of History, Nostalgia and the Historiography of Communism in the Czech Republic and East Central Europe, in: id. (ed.): *Past in the Making. Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*. Budapest 2008, 75–95.

8 Piotr S. Wandycz: *The Price of Freedom. A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*. London 1993; Joseph Rothschild and Nancy Merriwether Wingfield: *Return to Diversity. A Political History of East Central Europe since World War II*. New York 2000; Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York 1992.

9 Antoni Dudek: *Reglamentowana Rewolucja*. Cracow 2004.

termination of Communism some 20 years after.¹⁰ Such narratives promote an essentialist understanding of Socialism as an unchangeable, static, and ultimately ahistorical regime. Following this understanding, Socialism was not a period of history but rather an ideological condition of the mind.¹¹ Opposing this perception of static Socialism, I will argue for a processual understanding of Socialist modernities that allows for the study of change, contradiction, and ambivalence of Socialist rule in post-war Central and Eastern Europe.

Covering the most recent past and the imminent prehistory of our present, the contemporary history of Central and Eastern Europe centres on state Socialism, effectively making it a history of the post-war period. Tony Judt argued that “the war changed everything”¹² and included the war’s legacy into his seminal account of post-war Europe as it paved the way for social, economic, and political change under Socialism. Along a similar vein, Polish historians like Andrzej Friszke or Andrzej Paczkowski proposed including the Second World War as a vital prerequisite for understanding Poland’s history in the post-war decades.¹³ While this is most convincing and could be applied to Czechoslovakia and Hungary as well, empirical studies hardly connect the history of the Second World War with post-war developments. In this article, I will therefore pragmatically focus on post-war history and include the legacy of war at times. Similarly, I suggest to challenge 1989 as a clear-cut break and to study the long transformation of state Socialism.

If the contemporary history of Central and Eastern Europe requires a more open temporal frame, the same holds true for its spatial frame. Over the last fifteen years or so historians have effectively challenged Klaus Zernack’s and Jenő Szűcs’s classical definition of *Ostmitteleuropa* or East Central Europe as a historical region.¹⁴ Recently, Markus Krzoska, Kolja Lichy, and Konstantin

10 Florian Peters: Patriotische Geschichtsschreibung im Staatsauftrag. Polens neue Rechtsregierung bricht mit der historischen Legitimation des Neuanfangs von 1989 (May 2016), in: *Zeitgeschichte-online*. URL: <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/thema/patriotische-geschichtsschreibung-im-staatsauftrag> (13 July 2018); Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Sabine Stach and Katrin Stoll: Verordnete Geschichte. Nationalistische Narrative in Polen, in: *Osteuropa* 68.3–5 (2018), 447–464; Ferenc Laczó: Totalitarismus ohne Täter? Ungarns neuer Geschichtsmythos, in: *Osteuropa* 68. 35 (2018), 435–446.

11 For this critique, see Boris Buden: *Zone des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*. Frankfurt am Main 2009.

12 Tony Judt: *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*. New York 2005, 40.

13 Andrzej Friszke: *Polska. Losy państwa i narodu 1939–1989*. Warsaw 2003; Andrzej Paczkowski: *Pół wieku dziejów Polski, 1939–1989*. Warsaw 2005

14 Both authors moved beyond Oskar Halecki’s 1950 differentiation of Central Europe’s two halves that is clearly embedded in the cold war. Oskar Halecki: *The Limits and Divisions of*

Rometsch convincingly have argued that post-war and contemporary history for this region should move beyond structural and *longue durée* arguments and have criticised the quasi-essentialist institutionalisation of this space.¹⁵ However, this does not mean that the spatial concept lacks completely explanatory value. Joachim von Puttkamer, for instance, has emphasised the shared fundamentals of the *political* culture between Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.¹⁶ Moreover, historiographical debates about transcending the analytical container of the *nation-state* did not fail to make an impact on the historiography on Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.¹⁷ Research on transnational processes and constellations of entanglement between these states and the wider world further undermined assumptions about the three countries as an entity with clearly defined boundaries. Following this argument, I prefer to avoid the term East-Central Europe and, instead, make use of Central and Eastern Europe as an open spatial unit.

My emphasis on a more open time and space in writing the history of Central and Eastern Europe leads to the following seven interventions into historiography and suggestions for research yet to be done.

1 Historicising Contemporary Research

Contemporary history writing faces the challenge that contemporaries of the events are still alive. In fact, many researchers themselves have witnessed the events that they study which requires constant reflection of the historian's position towards their object of research. In response to the normative perceptions of state Socialism, it is necessary to historicise contemporary narratives and

European History. New York 1950; Klaus Zernack: *Osteuropa. Eine Einführung in seine Geschichte*. München 1977; Jenő Szűcs: The Three Historical Regions of Europe. An Outline, in: *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 29 (1983), 131–184. For a wider discussion, see Stefan Troebst: Historical Meso-Region. A Concept in Cultural Studies and Historiography, in: *European History Online (EGO)*, published by the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz 2012. URL: <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/troebsts-2010-en> (16 June 2018).

15 Markus Krzoska, Kolja Lichy and Konstantin Rometsch: Jenseits von Ostmitteleuropa? Zur Aporie einer deutschen Nischenforschung, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 16 (2018), 40–63.

16 Joachim von Puttkamer: Strukturelle und kulturelle Grundlagen des Politischen in Ostmitteleuropa im 20. Jahrhundert, in: *Comparativ* 12 (2008), 87–99.

17 Jörn Leonhard: Comparison, Transfer and Entanglement, or. How to Write Modern European History today?, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 14 (2016), 149–163.

to revise contemporary research in the social sciences, especially Western scholarship.

The history of opposition against Communism illustrates how the contemporary narratives have misinformed our understanding of politics and society during late Socialism well into the present time. In his seminal study *Worlds of Dissent*, Jonathan Bolton analyses the formation of what was to become Charter 77 and deconstructs the powerful myths of the Czechoslovak underground. He argues that the stories around dissidence served a pragmatic and functional purpose within the narrow non-conformist circles rather than describing the emergence of organised protest. For instance, the dissidents' frequent reference to human rights and the Helsinki accords enabled basic communication with Western benefactors and provided some protection against unlawful prosecution. However, these references fail to explain the roots of Czech dissidents in philosophical phenomenology and existentialism. Even more so, the universal scope of the Helsinki accords contradicted the immense pragmatism that many dissidents employed in their protest.¹⁸ Bolton, moreover, repeatedly stressed the diversity of dissidents and their capacity to integrate such cultural and ideological diversity.

Other scholars such as Agnes Arndt, Robert Brier, Dariusz Gawin, or Michal Kopeček contributed to this new school in the history of dissidence and contextualised the narratives of dissidence further.¹⁹ Putting dissidence into its historical contexts necessitates reflection of key analytical tools such as the concept of civil society. Since the late 1970s the concept of civil society has been used to describe the emergence of public opposition in Central and Eastern Europe, for instance when in 1978 Jaques Rupnik detected a “rebirth of civil society” in Poland.²⁰ More prominently, Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen modelled their theory of civil society along the example of Polish opposition and

18 Jonathan Bolton: *Worlds of Dissent. Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*. Cambridge, MA 2012, 24–28.

19 Agnes Arndt: *Rote Bürger. Eine Milieu- und Beziehungsgeschichte linker Dissidenz in Polen (1956–1976)*, Göttingen 2013; Robert Brier (ed.): *Entangled Protest. Transnational Approaches to the History of Dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Osnabrück 2013; Michal Kopeček: Human Rights Facing a National Past. Dissident ‘Civic Patriotism’ and the Return of History in East Central Europe, 1968–1989, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38 (2012), 573–602; Dariusz Gawin: *Wielki zwrot. Ewolucja lewicy i odrodzenie idei społeczeństwa obywatelskiego 1956–1976*. Cracow 2013.

20 Jacques Rupnik: Dissent in Poland, 1968–78. The End of Revisionism and the Rebirth of Civil Society, in: Rudolf L. Tórkés (ed.), *Opposition in Eastern Europe*. London 1979, 60–112.

assumed that oppositional actors intentionally constructed civil society.²¹ Arndt, however, revealed that Polish oppositional intellectuals had only learned of the term and probably of the concept from Western sources and came to use it several years after the formation of public opposition.²² Similarly to the Helsinki narrative, the dissidents' references to civil society served to attract Western support and added to their success. Such "keyword-communication"²³ produced a circular reasoning that has since been resumed time and time again when historians analyse opposition in Central and Eastern Europe as civil society. Instead, we need to historicise civil society as a political concept shared between East and West and make it an object of historical study itself.

30 years after the opening of archives, critical distance towards the history of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe still remains scarce. However, the example discussed here shows that the contemporary knowledge about dissidence is biased in two ways, from within dissident discourse and from Western scholarship. This crucial role of Western scholars for our understanding of social movements in Central and Eastern Europe forms a specificity of Central and Eastern European contemporary history and adds to the challenge of dealing with contemporary finding of the social sciences.²⁴ Given the strict limitations of sociology and political sciences under state Socialism, Western scholars and in some cases journalists filled this gap and presented a first analysis of dissidence and protest.²⁵ Many of these accounts reproduced inner-oppositional narratives, others even inspired oppositional self-conceptions.²⁶ Scholars need, however, to reflect their own involvement – or the involvement of their academic teachers – into the formation of these categories and need to establish new categories of analysis to cope with the temporal overlap between the subject of study and the formation of scholarly knowledge.

21 Andrew Arato: *Civil Society vs. the State. Poland 1980–1981*, in: *Telos* (1981), 23–47; Andrew Arato/Jean L. Cohen: *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge, MA 1992.

22 Agnes Arndt: *Intellektuelle in der Opposition. Diskurse zur Zivilgesellschaft in der Volksrepublik Polen*. Frankfurt am Main 2007.

23 Lisa Bonn: *Begriffskonjunktur Zivilgesellschaft. Zur missverständlichen Interpretation dissidentischer Bewegungen in Osteuropa*, in: Lino Klevesath and Holger Zapf (eds.): *Demokratie – Kultur – Moderne*. München 2011, 121–131, here 121.

24 See Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael, *Nach dem Boom*.

25 Timothy Garton Ash: *The Polish Revolution. Solidarity*. New Haven 2002; Alain Touraine, François Dubet, Michel Wieviorka and Jan Strzelecki: *Solidarity. Poland 1980–1981*. Cambridge 1983.

26 Julia Metger: *Writing the Papers. How Western Correspondents reported the first Dissident Trials in Moscow, 1965–1972*, in: Robert Brier (ed.): *Entangled Protest. Transnational Approaches to the History of Dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Osnabrück 2013, 87–108.

2 Reassessing Power Relations

The call for historicisation includes reconsidering the description of social structures and in consequence reassessing power relations. The historical narration and commemoration of violence in Central and Eastern Europe widely follows a normative framework of oppression, collaboration, and resistance. It is obvious that such normative structures of violence characterise a context of war and occupation, but in the history of Central and Eastern Europe they extend towards authoritarian rule and often provide a narrative for the post-war history of the region. My intervention does not question that violence and oppression were integral aspects of this history. However, the strict normative and moral qualification of historical actors and their actions is unfit for historical analysis as it often reproduces contemporary judgement and follows contemporary understanding of social roles. Especially this static and normative understanding of social action runs the risk of neglecting, if not outright denying the victim's agency. Here, I will draw on the dynamic research on societies under occupation and extend this inspiration to post-war history.

The distinction of occupiers and the occupied seems self-evident in societies under occupation. Yet, it is a gross simplification. In a recent contribution on the every-day history of the Second World War, Tatjana Tönsmeier argued for a contextual and relational approach to power and violence that studies face-to-face relations and brings to the fore the agency of individuals in complex situations.²⁷ Maren Röger applies such an approach in her study on the sexual relations between German men and Polish women in Nazi occupied Poland. Bringing forward the agency of women in such relationships, Röger illuminates an aspect of occupation that had been often neglected in research.²⁸ Röger, however, distinguishes commercial, consensual, and forced sexual contacts and many of her examples crossed these lines while sexual coercion was frequent. In her study, she shows the fluidity of normative categories as contemporary racist Nazi ideology often failed to regulate sexual contacts or was openly

27 Tatjana Tönsmeier: „Besatzungsgesellschaften: Begriffliche und konzeptionelle Überlegungen zur Erfahrungsgeschichte des Alltags unter deutscher Besatzung im Zweiten Weltkrieg“, in: Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte (18 Dec. 2015). URL: <http://docupedia.de/zg/Besatzungsgesellschaften?oldid=125790> (13 July 2018).

28 For a wider discussion, see Nicholas Stargardt: Wartime occupation by Germany: Food and sex, in: *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, 2 (2015), 385–411.

circumvented. The negotiation of acceptable sexuality, and its description in terms of loyalty or collaboration adds to this fluidity.²⁹

For many contemporaries the experiences of occupation and war continued into the immediate post-war period as Marcin Zaremba demonstrates in *Great Fear*, a study of the civil war-like situation in Poland between 1944 and 1947.³⁰ The normative distinctions established under occupation played a significant role for post-war societies in Central and Eastern Europe and often provided the episteme for the description of Communism. These normative distinctions posed the basis for the post-war legal procedures and in official discourse they effectively structured identity politics by marking out ‘true’ Poles, Czechs and Slovaks, or Hungarians against Nazi occupation.³¹ From an anti-Communist viewpoint, this episteme translated into the description of state Socialism and provided the language against Soviet hegemony.

The historical analysis of violence and oppression in any form needs to address the complexity and ambivalence of power. This means studying different actors and their individual agency or *Eigen-Sinn*³² beyond such contemporary normative rules. The study of Central and Eastern Europe in wartime and after the war blurs allegedly clear-cut distinctions of social groups and helps to unsettle an affirmative clarity of power.

3 Rethinking Ideology

The history of state Socialism in Central and Eastern Europe calls for rethinking ideology, both from the angle of the history of ideas and with a view to social organisation. Ideology clearly has been a leitmotif in Central and Eastern European history throughout the twentieth century, and especially so during the Soviet styled regimes after 1948. But to this day, research too often perceives Socialism and Socialists as a holistic formation. Thereby, scholars run the risk of reproducing Socialist self-images as well as the paradigm of totalitarianism.

²⁹ Maren Röger: *Kriegsbeziehungen. Intimität, Gewalt und Prostitution im besetzten Polen 1939 bis 1945*. Frankfurt am Main 2015.

³⁰ Marcin Zaremba: *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947*. Cracow 2012.

³¹ See for instance, T. Pasák: *Český fašism 1922–1945 a kolaborace 1939–1945*. Prague 1999.

³² For a introduction into the concept, see Alf Lüdtke: *Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*. Münster 2015; Thomas Lindenberger: *Eigen-Sinn, Domination and No Resistance*, in: *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* (03 Aug. 2015). URL: http://docupedia.de/zg/lindenberger_eigensinn_v1_en_2015 (13 July 2018).

Two Czech historians, Michal Kopeček and Pavel Kolář, have tackled this monolithic understanding of state Socialism by analysing ideology as a social and intellectual process. Kopeček studies the political languages of Socialist revisionism and the formation of an inner-party reform movement across the region. While, after Stalin's death, party leaders strove for national ways of Communism, radical Marxist intellectuals aimed for "the lost sense of revolution" and openly debated alternatives to party orthodoxy and bureaucratic centralism. The language of official Marxism provided a tool to openly express such critique and influence political discourse in the form of *realpolitik*. Revisionism eventually failed and was limited to a small group of intellectuals, but Kopeček exposes the dynamic plurality of political debates and the plurality of Socialist ideology in the 1950s.³³ Although the Socialist and Communist parties maintained a self-image of strict discipline and ideological uniformity, it was exactly this codified language that allowed for relatively open debates.

Kolář adds to this history of Communism after Stalin with a perspective from below, i.e. with the study of ordinary party members. In his book *Post-Stalinism* he enquires into the crisis of Socialist self-images in Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Poland during de-Stalinisation after 1956 and discusses how new approaches towards Communist history, the ideological shift from class to nation, and a new non-teleological temporality of revolution underpinned the reform process. Kolář argues that these conceptual changes of Post-Stalinism produced a "processual utopia" that was shared by ordinary party members without falling prey to ideological fanaticism or utter opportunism.³⁴

Both authors convincingly deconstruct the crude and monolithic narratives of totalitarianism without even mentioning the concept. From a postmodern viewpoint, their emphasis on inner-party diversity and the processual character of ideology seems intuitive and is well in line with my two first interventions. They also move beyond classical historiographic revisionism and reveal how the political languages of Socialism interweaved conformity, deviance, and—as one might add—unresponsiveness. Within the field of Communist studies, these two books have the potential to initiate a sea change. With their interest in conceptual history and the history of ideas Kopeček and Kolář stand out from other contributions to the political history of Communism. In consequence, they deconstruct the dyadic opposition of state and party against society and also overcome an essentialist notion of the political that imagines history in

33 Michal Kopeček: *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce. Zrod a počátky marxistického revizionismu ve střední Evropě 1953–1960*. Prague 2009.

34 Pavel Kolář: *Der Poststalinismus. Ideologie und Utopie einer Epoche*. Cologne 2016, 329–330.

terms of a Schmittian differentiation of friends and foes. Instead, Kopeček and Kolář study the *Sinnwelt* of state Socialism and take seriously that the Socialist utopia held, indeed, promise and attraction for many ordinary people and the new intelligentsia.³⁵ Without question such an approach towards the history of Socialist regimes breaks a taboo in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, but their findings underline that it is worth doing so.

Both studies limit their analysis to the 1950s and early 1960s but it is obvious that their processual approach towards ideological *Sinnwelten* is most promising for the history after 1968 or what Judt coined “the end of the affair”³⁶ with Communism. In Prague and Warsaw, 1968 signified both the heydays and the violent end of reform Socialist and confronted revisionists with a shattered utopia. However, the ideological re-orientation that followed this experience of contingency awaits further scrutiny and will benefit from Kopeček’s and Kolář’s suggestions.

4 Bringing Mobility to the Fore

Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary were highly mobile societies under Communism. This seems to be surprising given the manifold studies on the homogenising effects of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath for the region. For instance, Naimark and Mann pointed out the effects ethnic cleansing had on modern statehood in the region.³⁷ Poland before 1939, to give an example, had a population with approximately 30% of ethnic minorities, especially in the Eastern borderlands. After the German mass killings of Polish Jews, the re-drawing of state borders and the expulsion of Poles as well as Germans and Ukrainians rendered post-war Poland ethnically essentially Polish and caused significant societal change. Poles both from the Eastern border regions that now became part of the Soviet Union and from central Poland

³⁵ In this they contribute to what Sabrow described as a cultural history approach towards the study of Socialist dictatorships. Martin Sabrow: *Sozialismus als Sinnwelt. Diktatorische Herrschaft in kulturhistorischer Perspektive*, in: *Potsdamer Bulletin für Zeithistorische Studien* 40/41 (2007), 9–23.

³⁶ Judt, *Postwar*, 422.

³⁷ Norman M. Naimark: *Fires of Hatred. Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Cambridge 2002; Michael Mann: *The Dark Side of Democracy. Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. New York 2004.

resettled to the new Western territories. Scholars such as Gregor Thum, Beata Halicka, Mateusz Hartwich or Hugo Service have stressed that this frontier situation in the “Wild West” and the integration of new and fragile local communities contributed greatly to the making of a new society under state Socialism.³⁸

In his book *A Country on the Move*, Markus Krzoska suggests studying Polish post-war history from the angle of mobility, as this sheds new light on long-term social dynamics and transformations that are often omitted in the study of state Socialism. Clearly, such mobility rested on migration – both within the country’s shifting boundaries and beyond them. Krzoska convincingly demonstrates how policies of industrialisation triggered both urbanisation and a specific “incomplete migration” that saw industrial labourers commuting between rural homes and workplaces in industrial centres – a phenomenon that Sándor Horváth described similarly in the Hungarian case.³⁹ In longer perspective, such forms of mobility laid the path to labour migration across state borders that became (again) frequent after 1989 but had existed well before.

Moreover, upward social mobility complemented the geographical movement of Poles after 1945. As a consequence of Nazi and Soviet mass killing–Poland had lost approximately 40% of its political and cultural elites during the Second World War–industrialisation created opportunities of social advance for a young technical intelligentsia, but also for workers. Katherine Lebow analyses this demographic and social transformation in her book on the Nowa Huta steelworks and planned city on the outskirts of Cracow.⁴⁰ She follows the life of “new men” who deliberately participated in the Socialist project to improve their living conditions and start a different and more prosperous life. This included “women of steel”, who for a short period of time during Stalinism worked in hard manual labour and practically served as breadwinners to their families–thus transgressing traditional gender boundaries.⁴¹ By the 1970s, more

38 See also, Gregor Thum: *Uprooted. How Breslau became Wrocław during the Century of Expulsions*. Princeton 2011; Beata Halicka: *Polens Wilder Westen. Erzwungene Migration und die kulturelle Aneignung des Oderraums 1945–1948*. Paderborn 2013; Mateusz Hartwich: *Das Schlesische Riesengebirge. Die Polonisierung einer Landschaft nach 1945*. Cologne 2012; Hugo Service: *Germans to Poles. Communism, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War*. Cambridge 2014.

39 Markus Krzoska: *Ein Land unterwegs. Kulturgeschichte Polens seit 1945*. Paderborn 2015, 79; Sándor Horváth: *Stalinism Reloaded. Everyday Life in Stalin-City, Hungary*. Bloomington, IN 2017.

40 Katherine Lebow: *Unfinished Utopia. Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949–56*. Ithaca 2013.

41 For a more detailed analysis of gender and labour relations, see Natalia Jarska: *Kobiety z marmuru. Robotnice w Polsce w latach 1945–1960*. Warsaw 2015.

than a third of administrative and intellectual elites in Poland had progressed from the peasantry within two generations.

Finally, employing mobility draws scholarly attention to borders and the crossing of state borders. The international research project *Hidden Paths within Socialism* unveiled the fragility and permeability of border regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and presented numerous examples of legal, tolerated, or illegal border crossing despite harsh controls.⁴² Especially the case of unofficial commercial relations and consumerism points to the value of investigating the mobility of objects. Commercial activities posed an integral part of international tourism under Communism, often simply to recoup the individual costs of travelling. In other instances, much needed goods regularly moved across state borders and in turn helped to meet consumer demand within planned economies. Jerzy Kochanowski illustrates how illegal smuggling from Slovakia satisfied Polish demand of zips throughout Socialism. Entire families from Warsaw travelled to the border region to stock up for the new season.⁴³ Such hidden paths of smuggling relied on much older contacts in the Carpathian mountains and among the Góraly community in both countries. Therefore, the movement of zips and clothes exposes Communist rule as surprisingly flexible and pragmatically accommodating, not only in one mountain region but also in specific fields of everyday life.

These three aspects of mobility underline that we need to study Polish society, and Central and Eastern European societies more generally, as in a state of flux during state Socialism. Social engineering, industrial urbanisation, but also deviant consumerism have contributed decisively to this fluid constellation and allow for studying social change in more details.⁴⁴ A relational approach towards these mobilities helps to relate the different levels of social action to each without necessarily marking off micro-, macro-, and macro perspectives.⁴⁵

42 Włodzimierz Borodziej, Jerzy Kochanowski and Joachim von Puttkamer (eds.): “Schleichwege”. *Inoffizielle Begegnungen sozialistischer Staatsbürger zwischen 1956 und 1989*. Cologne 2010; Włodzimierz Borodziej, Jerzy Kochanowski and Joachim von Puttkamer: *Hidden Paths within Socialism*, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 8 (2010), 165–178.

43 Jerzy Kochanowski: *Jenseits der Planwirtschaft. Der Schwarzmarkt in Polen 1944–1989*. Göttingen 2013.

44 Nigel Swain: *Urban and Industrial Everyday Life under Socialism and Post-Socialism*, in: *Contemporary European History* 26 (2017), 561–572.

45 For a concept of relational history in studying of migration, see Anne Friedrich: *Placing migration in perspective: Neue Wege einer relationalen Geschichtsschreibung*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 44 (2018), 167–195.

Such relational historiography promises to increase our understanding not only of Communism, but of East Central Europe as such.

5 Bearing Contradictions

The Soviet styled regimes triggered a radical modernisation in Central and Eastern Europe. Following the Marxist promise of progress and extensive propaganda displaying such development, modernisation was presented as a historical fact. Similarly, Western scholarship proposed a theory of modernisation that reflected on the Soviet example and resembled Marxist teleology.⁴⁶ However, investigations into such projects reveal the manifold contradictions of modernisation. Here, I argue that these contradictions are inherent to modernities and open a new perspective on the inner structure of Socialist societies.

Matěj Spurný enquires into the history of the mining town Most in Northern Bohemia and its complete relocation as a “laboratory of Socialist modernities”.⁴⁷ Between 1964 and 1970, Most was torn down and built again about a kilometre away to ensure easier exploitation of opencast coal pits. However, new Most was no top-down project of the Communist party or the radical planning of the Stalinist era but was in fact proposed by local mining managers. It testifies to the technocratic and economic administration of the 1960s. The clearing plan for the town argued with the effectiveness of such harsh measures for coal mining and affirmed a narrative of modern rationalisation. In addition, the planning of new Most promised rational solutions to social conflicts due to crowded living spaces, the improvement of hygiene and even a city of roses – and fulfilled such promises at least for a short time.

Strikingly, the town’s Roman Catholic church was not destroyed but moved some 850 metres to the east. Following a new awareness for the region’s heritage and some criticism of the town’s demolition since the 1960s the church was shifted with an innovative and custom-built railway system. Under the rules of censored press, debates used a highly coded language, but they still took place in the public. As Spurný argues, moving the church brought two distinct modern discourses into conflict and cooperation, technocratic planning and heritage

⁴⁶ Ulrich Herbert: Europe in High Modernity. Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 5 (2007), 5–20, here 8–9.

⁴⁷ Matěj Spurný: *Most do budoucnosti. Laboratoř socialistické modernity na severu Čech*. Prague 2016.

preservation. Although the ČSSR had not signed the international Heritage Convention of 1972, this context influenced the decision on Most's church. With this, the Czechoslovak authorities made use of modernity in a double sense and turned the church itself into a "monument to modernity".⁴⁸

In his critique of modernisation as a normative concept of progress, Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman pointed to the fact that such emphasis on industrialisation and rationalisation conveys a notion of clarity and stability.⁴⁹ Spurný's example of the city of Most and many others prove that modernity often provoked quite the opposite.⁵⁰ Modernisation comprises a bundle of processes, processes which often interfere with each other. Therefore, scholars working on modernity should focus on its procedural nature and modernisation, and confront the discourse of modernity with attempts at putting its concepts into practice.

Spurný embeds the history of Most into global perspectives of modern rationalisation and economic planning. He frequently points to similarities with Western European infrastructural modernisation and the critical discourse spawned by these processes since the 1970s.⁵¹ This comparison also hints at the inter-war legacy of modernist planning, both in East and West, as first plans to relocate Most had come up in the 1920s and 1930s but remained technically complicated.

6 Reaching Beyond the Nation State

Just as Spurný's study inspired the asymmetric comparison of Czechoslovakia with Western Europe, many of the recent scholarly contributions discussed in this essay have put the nation state into perspective. Summing these studies up, it is necessary to move scholarship beyond the nation state in essentially three ways. First, scholars should employ a comparative research design; second, the entangled dimension of Central and Eastern European history needs to be further

48 Eagle Glassheim: Most, the Town that Moved. Coal, Communists and the 'Gypsy Question' in Post-War Czechoslovakia, in: *Environment and History* 13 (2007), 447–476, here 448.

49 Zygmunt Bauman: *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge 1991.

50 For a further discussion of the literature, see Swain, *Everyday Life*.

51 Other contributions to the urban and architectural history of Socialism have also stressed this entangled history of building modern cities, see most prominently Kimberly Elman Zarecor: *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960*. Pittsburg 2011 and for an overview Vladimir Kulić: The Builders of Socialism. Eastern Europe's Cities in Recent Historiography, in: *Contemporary European History* 26 (2017), 545–560.

elaborated, and, third, Central and Eastern Europe should be more systematically placed within global history.

First, the comparison of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and – to some degree – the GDR provided crucial insights into the functioning of state Socialism as Kolář demonstrated. In addition, Christian Domnitz's comparative analysis of official public spheres in Central and Eastern Europe revealed the pragmatism and adaptability of Polish media. Here, Poland markedly differed from the far more dogmatic and rigid discourse in Czechoslovakia or the GDR. Comparing the three cases he indicates both a significant unsettling of Socialist legitimacy and a turn of official and inner-party debates towards the concept of Europe well before 1989.⁵² With this, Domnitz questions the received emphasis on the dissident debate on *Mittleuropa* and reveals how both non-conformist and conformist actors opened up wider mental maps beyond the bloc divide.

Second, we need to identify further processes of transfer across the East-West divide and thus deconstruct the hermetic divide conjured up by Churchill's 1946 image of the "iron curtain". Historical research has so far emphasised the reception of Western developments in the East, thereby sketching a picture of silent Westernisation. As soon as we turn this perspective around the binary logics of the Cold War appear far less self-evident.⁵³ The history of opposition against Socialism proves most promising to carve out the entanglement of Central and Eastern Europe as the discussion of Bolton, Arndt, and others indicated. To add another example in more detail, Brier demonstrated how the Polish trade union movement *Solidarność* turned into a versatile symbol for Western political discourse. Competing political options, such as American conservatives, the German peace movement, or the French anti-totalitarian movement, appropriated the Polish opposition and seized on the concept of Solidarity during the 1980s.⁵⁴ In return, Polish actors stimulated such reception, employed their newly established agency, and brought Western support into use for the oppositional underground.

⁵² Christian Domnitz: *Hinwendung nach Europa. Öffentlichkeitswandel im Staatssozialismus 1975–1989*. Bochum 2015.

⁵³ Frank Reichherzer: Mit dem ‚Kalten Krieg‘ experimentieren. Ein Denkanstoß, in: Frank Reichherzer, Emmanuel Droit and Jan Hansen (eds.): *Den Kalten Krieg vermessen*. Berlin 2018, 1–14.

⁵⁴ Robert Brier: Poland's Solidarity as a Contested Symbol of the Cold War. Transatlantic Debates after the Polish Crisis, in: Kiran Klaus Patel and Kenneth Weisbrode (eds.): *European integration and the Atlantic community in the 1980s*. Cambridge 2013, 83–105. See also, Robert Brier: Entangled Protest. Dissent and the Transnational History of 1970s and 1980s, in: Robert

Third, these insights from historical comparison and the study of entanglements beg analytical integration within a global history framework. Historical research on Central and Eastern Europe was one of the first historiographical fields to deconstruct Eurocentrism. Larry Wolff's seminal study revealed the invention of Eastern Europe and many other scholars argued against narratives of backwardness that had prevailed, for instance, in the study of Russia and the Soviet Union.⁵⁵ However, this methodological awareness has failed, by and large, to materialise into an empirical interest in the region's global contemporary history.⁵⁶ Here, other disciplines such as anthropology provide a fresh perspective on Central and Eastern Europe, as for instance Christina Schwenkel investigated the history and mobility of Vietnamese contract labourers in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR. Her contribution stresses the long legacy of Socialist internationalism unfolding in every-day history of Socialism and post-Socialism.⁵⁷ Further research, similar to Tobias Rupperecht's study on vernacular appropriation of internationalism in the Soviet Union will take our understanding of Socialist societies further.⁵⁸

All three suggestions underline the empirical potential and methodological reflection of contemporary history writing beyond the nation state as a container and beyond the historical region as an essentialist concept. Central and Eastern Europe was an integral part of European and global history throughout the twentieth century and a strictly national or local approach will fall short of a balanced analysis. The examples presented here also underline that the framework of comparison, transfer, and entanglements needs to be handled flexibly and should be inductively derived from the object of study.

Brier (ed.): *Entangled Protest. Transnational Approaches to the History of Dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*. Osnabrück 2013, 11–42.

55 Larry Wolff: *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 1994.

56 In contrast, the global history of nineteenth and early twentieth century Central and Eastern Europe provides some intriguing studies, see for example, Sarah Lemmen: *Tschechen auf Reisen. Repräsentationen der außereuropäischen Welt und nationale Identität in Ostmitteleuropa 1890–1938*. Cologne 2018.

57 Christina Schwenkel (ed.): *Vietnamese in Central Europe. Special Issue of Journal of Vietnamese Studies 12.1* (2017).

58 For the Soviet example, see Tobias Rupperecht: *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War*. Cambridge 2015.

7 History from the Margins

Writing history from the margins provides new insights also for the centre. Two of my earlier interventions reflected upon Western categories in social sciences (2) and Eurocentrism (6) that shape our understanding of Central and Eastern Europe. Conservative authors from the region have also raised such criticism, for instance Zdzisław Krasnodębski who rallies against the Polish mimicry of Western liberalism since the 1980s and claims instead the authenticity of Polish political thought that should be accepted into a European canon of ideas.⁵⁹ In fact, Polish controversies over the history of Communism resemble in many aspects postcolonial discourse and point to the relevance of history from the margins.⁶⁰

In her reflections on post-Socialism, Claudia Kraft confronts Poland's history with the sensibilities and concepts of postcolonial studies.⁶¹ She reveals the temporal quality of Poland's peripheral situation as both liberal and conservative intellectuals conceptualise 1989 as a definite and essentialist rupture: A liberal narrative of 1989 revolves around Poland's transition towards democracy and brings forward modernisation against persistent conservative traditions. In contrast to this, actors right of the political centre, such as Krasnodębski, define Socialism in essentialist term and normatively write it off as a "red century" that lasts beyond the alleged break of 1989 and needs to be eradicated from Polish culture.⁶² However, Kraft argues for an epistemic understanding of post-Socialism that draws on postcolonialism and moves beyond narratives of modernisation or ideological authenticity. Categories such as "transformation" or "high modernity" are neither universal nor valid beyond time and space, but describe specific temporal constellations. Here, the study of Central and Eastern

⁵⁹ Zdzisław Krasnodębski: *Demokracja peryferii*. Gdańsk 2003.

⁶⁰ Agata Bielik-Robson: *Dzikość serca i polska postkolonialna*, in: *Krytyka polityczna* (16 Dec. 2012). URL: <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/felietony/agata-bielik-robson/dzikosc-serca-i-polska-postkolonialna/> (13 July 2018).

⁶¹ See, for instance, Jan Sowa: *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*. Warsaw 2011; Hanna Gosk and Dorota Kołodziejczyk (eds.): *Historie, społeczeństwa, przestrzeń dialogu. Studia postzależnościowe w perspektywie porównawczej*. Warsaw 2014.

⁶² Claudia Kraft: *Phantomgrenzen und Zeitschichten im Postsozialismus. Ist der Postsozialismus postkolonial?*, in: Béatrice von Hirschhausen, Hannes Grandits, Claudia Kraft, Dietmar Müller and Thomas Serrier (eds.): *Phantomgrenzen. Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken* (2015), 166–190, here 184–186.

Europe's post-Socialism provides a helpful example that might illuminate the study of contemporary region more generally.⁶³

In his history of neoliberal Europe and economic reforms after 1989, Philipp Ther presents such a history from the margins although he does not employ postcolonial theory. Studying the liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation of formerly planned economies, the author argues that Central and Eastern Europe went through an earlier and more successful transformation than Western or Southern European economies. Along the example of the former GDR's integration into the Federal Republic of Germany, Ther develops a model of co-transformation—i.e. the conceptual and processual transfer from East to West.⁶⁴ Stricter regulation of the welfare state, discourse on civil society, and individual biographies of politicians from the former GDR are analysed to illustrate the transformation from East to West. Thus, following Ther, East Germany became a laboratory for neoliberal Germany since the 2000s.⁶⁵ In addition to this, Ther elaborates that since the economic crisis of 2008 a new mental map of Europe emerged that attributed Central and Eastern Europe with a more central position and marginalised the South of Europe as backward and in need of reform.

Postcolonial theory can enrich our understanding of Central and Eastern Europe not only around 1989 but also in medium and long-term perspectives.⁶⁶ However, if the attribute postcolonial is used – and it is used – this should be handled with care as Krasnodębski's example shows. A postcolonial analysis means more than simply referring to a situation after colonial rule or anti-colonial attitude and making use of the moral empowerment such a situation provides. It means to approach contemporary history from a new position that moves beyond the historical narratives, the binary understanding of power and ideology, beyond the dominant actors of the time, and consequently beyond the epistemology of the colonial condition. In fact, a rather simple shift in focus may

⁶³ Ibid., 190. See also, Rüdiger Graf and Kim Christian Priemel: *Zeitgeschichte in der Welt der Sozialwissenschaften. Legitimität und Originalität einer Disziplin*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59 (2011), 479–508.

⁶⁴ In this Ther's argument clearly resembles Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff: *Theory from the South or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*. Boulder 2012.

⁶⁵ Philipp Ther: *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa*. Berlin 2015.

⁶⁶ Dorota Kołodziejczyk: Post-Colonial Transfer to Central-and Eastern Europe, in: *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2014), 124–142.

help to illustrate such “epistemic disobedience”, to use a concept of postcolonial theorist Walter Mignolo.⁶⁷ Ther, for example, emphasises the agency of ordinary citizens during economic transformation and stresses that many of these small private entrepreneurs transformed their countries more radically than did government economic policies. It is understood that such epistemic disobedience is in line with many inspirations of recent cultural and social history and summarises the interventions I have proposed in this article. In fact, postcolonial theory inspires new questions for the writing a contemporary history of Central and Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

This essay has enquired into the making and unmaking of multiple modernities of state Socialism and claimed that the analysis of post-war Central and Eastern Europe provides useful methodological insights beyond the region and this specific time frame. As this necessarily brief survey of recent literature on the transnational and cultural history of the region has shown, normative concepts like totalitarianism or an essentialist and monolithic understanding of Socialism have been productively unsettled. Transnational and postcolonial approaches to the region have also more generally undermined a normative understanding of the political that still prevails in much of the literature on Central and Eastern Europe after 1945.

Based on the existing literature I have put forward seven interventions in the field: First, I maintain that future research needs to historicise the concepts and findings of Western social research and develop more from cold war epistemologies. Second, future research will benefit from reassessing power relations and more emphasise on the agency of the allegedly powerless. This leads, third, to rethinking ideologies as an intellectual process and to study the *Sinnwelten* this ideology ensues. Fourth, a fresh view on mobilities, both geographical and social, human and post-human, underlines the fluidity of Socialist societies. Fifth, I suggested bearing the contradictions that follow from the study of modernisation as a bundle of processes and confront discourse of modernisation with the social and administrative processes it triggered. Sixth, I highlight the manifold insights that comparative research, the studies of transfer and entanglement between East and West, and global trajectories in anthropology have

⁶⁷ Walter Mignolo: Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 26:7–8 (2009), 1–23.

contributed to our understanding of the region. Finally, I argue for postcolonial theory and writing European and global history from the Central and Eastern European margins.

My seven interventions call for the situational and flexible study of Central and Eastern Europe beyond the constrictions of methodological nationalism and Cold War epistemology. We need to de-centre the Socialist projects in Central and Eastern Europe and relate these with other revisionist and non-conformist cultural formations in the region.⁶⁸ Such an understanding will underline the processual character of modernity and carve out the multiplicities of state Socialism. In consequence, we need to perceive state socialism as integral to the multiplicity of modernities and should integrate Central and Eastern Europe into European and global history.

In conclusion, it is crucial to approach the contemporary history of Central and Eastern Europe as a flexible and open research field. In a core definition, the region consists of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary often encompassing also the GDR and its most recent history spans between 1945 and 1989, but the inductive transgression of both time and space has proven most insightful and should be favoured over any restriction of the field. Adding to this, 30 years after the end of global Communism research continues to distance itself from the normative epistemes of this history. This epistemic disobedience and inductive research design will no doubt inform future research and enrich our understanding of the multiple modernities of state Socialism.

⁶⁸ Krylova suggested such an approach in critically discussing Kotkin's *Socialist Modernity*. Anna Krylova: Soviet Modernity. Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik Predicament, in: *Contemporary European History* 23 (2014), 167–192.

