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Post-imperial Europe: Integration through Disintegration

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In the post-imperial East Central Europe after the dissolution of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian empires, disappointment was commonplace. The imperial successor states were involved in revengeful animosities with neighbouring states, torn by their majority population's hatred of domestic minorities, bereft of tens of millions of their co-nationals who had remained in now foreign nation-states, exposed to huge influxes of refugees, and embittered by the territorial concessions that they were forced to make. By contrast, the newly established nation-states were plagued by miserable social and economic conditions, poor infrastructures, unemployment, inflation, rigid and immobile social stratification, and corrupt and inefficient administrations. Such developments gave rise to huge and traumatic deportations and migrations of populations, which, paradoxically, simultaneously immensely increased the mobility of their imagination. Using the technique of 'subversive mimicry', these nationally indistinct elements established cross-national transborder communities as the zones of 'national indifference' within the new nation-states. Carried by the energy of their longing, these communities introduced imbalances, fissures, and divisions into the nation-state communities, which determined their belonging.

Post-Versailles Europe: The Compensatory Perspective of Victims

Although the 1919 Treaty of Versailles represents an important date in the history of Europe, the division of the continent neither starts nor ends with it. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Kant summarized 'Christian Europe's' prejudices toward 'European Turkey', which had been established already during early modernity. He claims that the nations of European Turkey 'have never attained and never will attain what is necessary for the acquisition of a definite national character' because their states' constitutions do not leave space for individual freedom (Kant 2006a, 221–222). According to Chakrabarty's much more recent remark, imperial centres allocated to these 'barbarians' a pre-modern place 'elsewhere' and an

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outdated 'not yet' time, which relegated them to an enduring 'waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty 2000, 7). Although Chakrabarty primarily addresses Europe's relationship toward its *external* others, his description also perfectly fits Europe's attitude to its *internal* others. From the era of Enlightenment, Europe has built its distinct identity by detaching itself from both kinds of others. Although the gap between its centre and peripheries was introduced by European empires (Motyl 1996; Barkey 1996), their abolition did not eliminate it. Not only the successor states were 'chosen' by their glorious imperial past to inherit supremacy over the others but also the new nation-states' elites, paradoxically, demonstrated 'imperial' behaviour toward their internal and external 'subalterns'. In transferring onto them the stigma that their masters had originally imputed onto them, they merely deepened the imparity. Due to this, far from being eliminated through the post-Versailles unification of Europe on the model of nation-states, discrimination clandestinely became the basic principle for its reproduction.

The dissolution of four East-Central European Empires in the aftermath of the First World War induced the region's traumatic post-imperial condition. The disappointment was commonplace. The imperial successor states were involved in revengeful animosities with neighbouring states, torn by their majority population's hatred of domestic minorities, bereft of tens of millions of their co-nationals as well as exposed to huge influxes of refugees. Their embitterment arose from the territorial concessions that they were forced to make. Losing their former glory, they were 'transformed from a *Staatsvolk* [leading nation] of a Great Power into what they perceived as second-class citizens of third-class states' (Brubaker 1996, 124). This humiliation of their external compatriots rigidified the successor states' politics toward their ethnically mixed borderlands, initiating compensatory manoeuvres of self-aggrandizement.

As for the new nation-states, with the Treaty of Versailles (1919), Western powers introduced into them the principle of national self-determination, which endowed each nation with the political right to establish its own autonomous state. Such national modelling of the religiously, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically hybrid East-Central European states was not a unilateral imposition but a decision enthusiastically embraced by the carriers of their liberation movements who regarded the establishment of new states as a welcome opportunity for their own political establishment. Although this geopolitical extension of the principle of national self-determination was expected to 'Europeanize' East-Central European states, it ultimately deepened their frustration. It firmly attached their peoples to the vague prospect of their independence, which proved to be a mission impossible, considering their states' miserable social and economic conditions, poor infrastructures, unemployment, inflation, rigid and immobile social stratification, and corrupt and inefficient administrations.

The new nation-states blamed this desolate state of affairs on long-term exploitations and humiliations inflicted upon them by former empires and foreign powers. Their national elites were determined to remedy this 'pathological' condition (Brubaker 1996, 79). Instead, what they achieved was a simple reversal of the former

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power relationship: '[M]embers of former dominating nations [now] became minorities, and the new dominating nations sought retribution for past grievances' (Berend 1998, 187). In the new countries, the sense of backwardness was endemic, numerous obstacles to modernization fuelled bitterness, hatred, and revolt. Being underprivileged, many of their constituencies perceived themselves as victims (Kożuchowski 2013, 8–9). Being deprived of the right to self-determination they acted as enduring factors in their countries' ruination and disintegration.

The outbursts of frustration with the Treaty's outcome also induced revengeful animosities between the new countries. It ultimately paved the way for the establishment of populist dictators. Populism had been on a continual rise in East Central Europe since the turn of the century by systematically blurring the West-European clear distinction between the socialist and communist ideologies on the one hand and the nationalist, fascist and anti-Semitic ones on the other. By establishing the communicational, traffic and institutional network in East Central Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century, West European modern democracies tended to export their mobility into the region, leaving behind the past-oriented ideologies. However, the East-Central European populist leaders, by their engagement of various ideological hybrids and amalgams, abused and perverted this mobility by turning its advantages upside down.

If modernity has something to teach us, then, it is that 'one man's imagined community is another man's political prison' (Appadurai 1998, 32). Not everybody benefited from mobility, the proudly flagged distinctive trait of European civilization. As soon as it entered the East-Central European space after the dissolution of empires, it replaced its West European liberating face with a coercive one, initiating huge and devastating migrations of populations. 'By 1890, close to 40 percent of all Austro-Hungarians had left their original place of Heimat and migrated to their current homes from another part of the monarchy' (Judson 2016, 334). Almost four million men and women moved overseas, but hundreds of thousands returned within a few years (Judson 2016, 335). The former empires' metropoles or core nations faced equally harsh consequences. 'The Fall of the Habsburgs automatically turned the 25 percent of the Viennese population born outside the frontiers of the new Austria into foreigners, unless they chose to opt for citizenship' (Hobsbawm 1996, 15). Such a traumatic reconfiguration of post-imperial Europe's geopolitical circumstances deeply disquieted and disoriented the majority of its population, giving rise to an overwhelming sense of its defencelessness. Mobility as the basic prerequisite of West European democracies thus seems to have simultaneously acted as West European ally and East-Central European enemy.

Nonetheless, while post-imperial Europe's huge reconfiguration seriously endangered its population's material survival, it simultaneously immensely increased the mobility of its imagination by fostering its creativity (Appadurai 1998, 6). In the completely reshaped geopolitical space that now loomed large on the horizon, '[e]ven the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities' became 'open to the play of the imagination' (Appadurai 1998, 54). This means that, however harsh enforced

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migrations can be, they are accompanied by some emancipating consequences. To address their frustrating aspect first, late empires had already constructed their communication, traffic and mercantile networks to improve the military control of their peripheral constituencies, to facilitate their economic exploitation, and to avert them from switching to other empires. Next to fostering the import of food and raw materials from these provinces (Barkey 1996, 106), late imperial traffic networks envisaged the subsequent export of the finished products in the opposite direction. Although modernization claimed to be equalizing all its participants, it thus enhanced the economic imbalance between them still further (Berend 1998, 20–22). The following message underlay the integration of imperial provinces: *Only those that succumb to it are progressive and modern*. Those that remain loyal to their odd traditional habits confine themselves to their self-enclosed localities, excluding themselves from the universal process of civilization. They are stigmatized as backward. This is how modernization put the imperial provinces under the pressure of accelerated adaption.

However, faced with this 'egalitarian discrimination', these provinces created their peculiar technique of survival, which paved the way for the emancipating aspect of imperial modernization. It involuntarily provided the common background against which the provinces could learn their differences and homogenize themselves (Evans 2006; Cornwall 2006, 174–175). Through traumatic migrations that were induced by this modernization, they got the opportunity to make acquaintance with many other provinces that were hitherto barely known to them. Although the encounter with them was sometimes uncomfortable, discouraging and even terrifying, considering the differences that separated imperial provinces from each other, it enabled provincial communities to strengthen their resistance to the centres' discrimination by forging alliances with those who were equally subjected to it. Uniting with them against the common oppressor, they disregarded their mutual discrepancies and inequalities.

Their resistance took the shape of an operation, which Homi Bhabha, in his ground-breaking analysis of colonial circumstances, described as 'subversive mimicry' (Bhabha 1994, 94–132). By adopting the colonizer's manners and achievements, the colonized inadvertently parodies them. To be sure, already the population of European imperial provinces subverted modernization by adopting its results. While endeavouring to implement the West-European achievements, the 'provincials' distorted them. Their inadvertent re-signifying through adoption was a spontaneous act of the affirmation of their lack of distinction. Through it, the late imperial age opened the door for the post-imperial rise of the indistinct. Let us recall what Nietzsche states in his famous analysis of *ressentiment* in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

> While all noble morality grows from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says no to an 'outside,' to an 'other,' to a 'non-self'; and *this* no is its creative act. The reversal of the evaluating gaze – this necessary orientation outwards rather than inwards to the self – belongs characteristically to *ressentiment*. In order to exist at all, slave morality from the outset always needs an opposing, outer world; in physiological terms, it needs external stimuli in order to act – its action is fundamentally reaction. (Nietzsche 1996, 22; emphasis in original)

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To illustrate the point: the railways that were built to enable the centres' economic expansion gradually turned into the instruments of the periphery's resistance to it in the form of robberies and sabotage (Schenk 2013). Provincial elites that were educated in the imperially established provincial schools, or in the imperial centres themselves, engaged this knowledge for their opposition to them (Barkey 1996, 110). If the idea of this education was to differentiate imperial *societies*, provincial elites engaged it to homogenize their *communities*. The modern invention of society thus inadvertently became 'the condition for the more exact profiling of the concept of community, inasmuch as it could now advance into a collective name for all that which cannot be subsumed in the concept of society' (Rosa *et al*. 2010, 37–38, translation mine). The Habsburg Empire's political differentiation systematically produced its unprocessed residues in the form of ethnic communities that were 'forged in the context of Habsburg imperial institutions and in the possibilities these institutions foresaw' (Judson 2016, 452).

The delineated operation of subversion by adoption, which was already germane of imperial peripheries, re-emerged in the new nation-states after the breakdown of the empires. However, if in the late empires it was carried by the peripheral *national* elites as the victims of imperial centres, in the new nation-states their carriers became the victimized *nationally hybrid* or *indistinct* subalterns. With the new carriers, subversion by adoption created new objectives as well. In the outcome, across the post-imperial East Central Europe that had been expected to assimilate into West Europe by establishing its nation-states, cross-national transborder communities arose as the zones of 'national indifference' (Zahra 2010). Operating as the untranslatable residues of national translations, they developed a sort of *intra*national 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (Bhabha 1996), which was directed against the nation-states. Gradually, the proliferation of these zones subverted the nation-based integrational platform.

By enmeshing a multiplicity of small worlds into an interactive totality, cross-national transborder communities created an alternative model of worldly mutualism. This is how the energy of longing for imagined homelands along the lines of elective affinities disaggregated the law of belonging to the given nation-states. A series of prominent contemporary political theorists interpret these internal 'pockets of resistance' to the guided unification as the direct outcomes of the 'egalitarian discrimination' genuine to modernization's globalization. In their view, the collateral effect of the production of the modern world is the creation of would-be humans, spectral humans, and non-humans who are prevented from becoming legible within the established space of humanity (Agamben 1998, 121; Esposito 2011, 209; Butler 2004, 92). In order to rescue themselves from this humiliating situation, these subalterns generate their compensatory models of being-in-common.

Indeed, the geopolitically reconfigured East-Central European space became a harsh political prison for many of its constituencies, which is why their sense of belonging to their newly formed nation-states was replaced with the sense of longing for that which these states excluded from their constitutions and official memories. New state nationalisms befell and impoverished these constituencies, pinned them to

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the wall of dominating nations, stripped them of choice, silenced their alternatives, and nullified their complex identity by an imposed demonization of the 'other' (Brubaker 1996, 20–21). Since they longed for a different way to cohabit the political spaces that they were affiliated to, the door was wide open for forging alliances with the 'indistinct' from abroad who felt likewise 'stranded in the present' (Fritzsche 2004). However, while identifying with their comrades across the newly drawn state borders, the engineers of cross-national transborder communities gradually disintegrated the states they were affiliated to. Besides, by knitting together various frustrations into the platforms that promised a remedy for their participants, they homogenized the most heterogeneous victims, mobilizing them for their agendas (Hanson 2010, xvi). In this way, spontaneously following the late imperial model of national homogenization, cross-national communities acquired the same 'organic' profile.

That is to say, while creating the new kind of human togetherness out of their 'zones of indeterminacy', their 'engineers' took recourse to the past narratives of victimhood because of their potential to galvanize broad audiences. By establishing such an affiliation to the past, next to state, religious, cultural, ideological and linguistic boundaries, they also blurred those of historical epochs, disregarding a series of important differences between them. Consistently relying on such indistinct analogies, modern populists, for example, identified themselves with the great religious founders whose martyrdom had once mobilized the frustration of various kinds of victims (Mylonas 2003, 7–8). By merging deeply rooted religious patterns with their socialist, fascist or nationalist agendas (Berend 1998, 201), they energized the new states' victims to join the hatred against the allegedly perennial 'torturers'. The invoked victimhood communities were directly placed at this hatred's service. In a word, if the West European nation-states engaged communicational, traffic, and commercial mobility for the individual differentiation of their societies, the East-Central European 'subalterns' used it for their communities' collective homogenization, which was based on the demonization and exclusion of others. Rather than being subtle and complex, their public sacrificial narratives defined perpetrators and victims in clearly bipolar, antithetical terms (Alexander 2012, 16–19).

Before we turn to the response of West-European states to this unexpected 'perversion' of the nation-state as the envisaged platform of European unification, it deserves reminding that these states' very establishment was discriminatory and violent.

> Ever since the fifteenth century (and in the case of England much earlier), Western Europe has embarked on a huge homogenization drive with various degrees of success (the Spanish reconquista, England's expulsion of the Jews in the twelfth century, the religious wars in France and Germany), which, in conjunction with the strong dynastic states, had laid the foundations of the future nation-states. (Todorova 1997, 175)

As the French political philosopher Ernest Renan put it in his famous lecture 'What is a Nation?', the essence of a nation is that its individual representatives erase

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atrocities committed by their compatriots from their memories. 'Every French citizen has forgotten St. Bartholomew's Day and the thirteenth-century massacres in the Midi' (Renan 2006, 46). In view of these violent purifications of West-European nation-state bodies, which they were at enduring pains to expel from their official historical records, the East-Central European post-imperial exclusionary mechanisms represented for them a painful reminder of their own pasts. Their strong reservations toward the demonizing of others tended to prevent the traumatic return of it from their own distant past.

Postcolonial Europe: The Repenting Perspective of Perpetrators

Already with the Enlightenment, West Europe launched the project of a gradual detachment from its violent past. One of its chief engineers, Kant, was at pains to emancipate man from his destructive habits. In the treatise 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' (1784), he states that if history were delivered to man's naturally inborn base and selfish goals, it would amount to a 'senseless course' of devastation, upheavals and the complete exhaustion of human powers (Kant 2006b, 42, 47). 'For each of them will always misuse his freedom if he does not have anyone above him to apply force to him as the laws should require it' (Kant 2006b, 46). Kant's expectation, however, is that the united world society looming large on the horizon of his age will prevent citizens from living such an inappropriate, animally-blind life by subjecting them to the 'condition of compulsion' (Kant 2006b, 35, translation modified) or the pressure of historical necessity. By his natural disposition constructed from 'warped wood', man needs mankind 'to break his self-will and force him to obey a universally valid will under which everyone can be free' (Kant 2006b, 35). If he were not compelled to obey this supreme general agency, he would be destroyed by his essentially selfish and hostile nature, instead of developing the ability to reason that distinguishes him from animals. For Kant, the natural disposition is a wild compulsive force that has to be domesticated through a patient self-overcoming of man under the custody of mankind. Modernity puts man under the pressure of such a persistent overcoming of his basically animal nature.

The difficulty that Kant's argument must face, however, is that man's violent disposition characterizes the very agency expected to discipline him, i.e. mankind. The violence that had to be repressed thus returns. The agency called upon to supervise man's long journey to final freedom displays, in Kant's rendering, significantly coercive traits. While it encourages man to disobey his inherited identity, it commands him to obey his universal human duty. It thus repeatedly dooms him to an 'animal' bondage. This is how Kant's imperative for man to relentlessly individualize himself involuntarily reproduces man's violent disposition that it was expected to leave behind. Whoever adopts it necessarily subverts the idea of man as a being emancipated from his blind compulsions.

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The project of European modernity as launched by the Enlightenment thus appears to have been, from its very outset, accompanied by a traumatic re-emergence of 'animality' within the envisaged 'humanity'. It involuntarily headed toward the 'indistinct' that it strove to leave behind, which again forced it to renew efforts at overcoming itself. In the atmosphere of dissolving empires, Nietzsche became aware of the equivocal character of the Enlightenment project: 'My humanity amounts to a continuous self-overcoming [of its inhumanity]' (Nietzsche 1980, 276). Since inhumanity subversively resurfaces within its 'overcomer', its transgression becomes an interminable task. Inspired by Foucault's investigations of modernity's persistent 'normative work', Agamben remarks that its 'anthropological machine' incessantly produces the inhuman in the shape of 'the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form' (Agamben 2004, 37). Precisely the resurrection of this indistinct residue of humanity constantly pushes forward the modern idea of human distinction. Not 'animal' *others*, the right address of the human negation is *its own* reappearing 'animality'.

Nietzsche still believed that, through such sublimation via self-negation, the indistinct 'animal' hatred toward others transforms into a distinct 'human' love for them. In his *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), the contagious seed of 'a hatred the like of which has never been on earth' miraculously results in 'the deepest and most sublime of all kinds of love' (Nietzsche 1996, 20). To illustrate his trust in the sublimation of the devastating other-directed negation into a cultivated self-negation, let us consider paragraphs 354 and 355 of his *Joyful Wisdom* (1882). In these paragraphs, Nietzsche presents his own persistently self-re-evaluating philosophical technique as a culmination of a long development that began with the 'denigrated and humiliated' mob; continued with the actor who had learned to command his instincts with other instincts; then the 'artist' like the buffoon, the fool, and the clown; thereupon, the proper artist; until the process was finally crowned with the 'genius' (Nietzsche 2010). In his essay 'The Poet and this Time' (1906), Hugo von Hofmannsthal implicitly endorses Nietzsche's trust in redemption through self-dispossession, transferring it from the long-term axis of humankind onto the short-term axis of human life. Because the poet sees something that the blinded others overlook, he exposes himself to a common misunderstanding and contempt. However, despite such denigration, he must persevere with his sacrificial mission for his contemporaries' ultimate well-being. 'Living in the house of time, under the stairs, where everyone must pass him and no one respects him [. . .] an undetected beggar in the place of the dogs [. . .] without a job in this house, without service, without rights, without duty' (von Hofmannsthal 1979, 66–68, translation mine), only such a self-animalized poet can create a human world bereft of the 'animal' hatred toward others.

However, the post-imperial age shattered such late imperial trust in the 'animalized' human residues as the motors of new humanity. Taught by the devastating mass movements, for example, Robert Musil interprets these agencies attached to continuous self-dispossession in a more equivocal manner. In 'A sort of introduction' to his *Man without Qualities* (1921) his narrator states that next to nine identities

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attributed to 'every dweller on earth' by their internally diversified societies, there is a tenth attribute, which is 'difficult to describe', 'merely an empty, invisible space with reality standing in the middle of it like a little toy brick town, abandoned by the imagination' (Musil 2014, 34, translation mine). But since this tenth attribute – the amorphous human 'soul' – that eludes representation and determination, absorbs into its emptiness all the remaining determinable identity attributes, 'every dweller on earth' ultimately becomes a 'man without qualities', with all his or her identity attributes subjected to a persistent negation (Musil 2014, 220). Because the 'soul' has no identifiable substance, it voids all identifiable substances that cross its path. Due to such a systematic de-identification of its immediate surrounding, it finds it very difficult to establish contacts with 'the souls accommodated behind the next corner' but bridges huge distances between the oceans and continents with ease (Musil 2014, 220).

It is with deeply ambiguous effects that Musil's loitering *anima* unmoors the humans from their affiliation to extant communities. It deactivates the humiliating bonds of their affiliation to them in favour of an 'oceanic feeling' that merges them with the whole universe. Since the 'soul' feels dispossessed by the identity imposed upon it by its political community, it remedies this dispossession by dissolving the imposed identity in an 'organic community' with historically and spatially distant foreigners. In such a way, a seemingly emancipating imagined homeland opens at the heart of a given state. We have seen, however, the perilous effects such imagined homelands induced in East-Central Europe.

In his essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud anticipates Musil's reservations toward 'organic communities' by cautioning that joining them implies a regression of individuals to the 'animal' stage of an obedient horde. In 'Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', he argues that they eliminate the achievements of a long cultural development such as individual will, consciousness, self-control, logic, and a sense of reality (Freud 2001, 93). His thesis is that 'organic communities' are by no means an overcome phase of human history but rather a permanent after-effect of its differentiation. Resulting from the resurfacing desire for self-dissolution of dispossessed collectivities and individuals, they regularly re-emerge within the differentiated human society. This is how, for instance, the communities of army and church come into being (Freud 2001, 88–94). The proliferation of these supposedly surmounted modes of identification makes the present spectral and uncanny, saturated with the resonances of its terrifying past (Freud 1947a, 295; 1947b, 232). Freud's thesis is anything but overcome. So-called crony capitalism, which, after having reintroduced the organic communal principle into the accelerated social differentiation, enjoys today the status of a global phenomenon, is on the rise equally in the United States as in the European Union.

In neoliberal societies, such a contagious spreading of the indistinct into everyday reality causes disorientation and 'free-floating anxiety' (Berlant 2011, 80). Nevertheless, as the confrontation between Nietzsche's and von Hofmannsthal's enthusiasms on the one hand and Musil's and Freud's reservations on the other testifies, the re-emergence of the animal within the human is an equivocal phenomenon. Derrida for example once noticed how fascinating and fertilizing the resurrection of

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the indistinct was for interwar European thinkers who felt stranded in their present: '[W]hy is [the uncanny] the best name, the best concept, for something which resists consistency, system, semantic identity? Why is it *the* experience, the most thinking experience in Freud and in Heidegger?' (Derrida 2003, 35; emphasis in original). The uncanny even becomes the carrier of Derrida's idea of Europe because Europe 'consists precisely of not closing itself off in its own identity and in advancing itself in an exemplary way towards what it is not' (Derrida 1992, 12). To sum up, while the dissemination of non-human residues into the human reality ensues the disintegration of some post-imperial entities, it stimulates others to forge transborder alliances. Although seemingly inimical to one another, integration and disintegration prove to be parallel and inextricable processes.

Some 40 years after East-Central Europe had entered its post-imperial age, the traumatic dissolution of European colonial empires gave rise to a new, West European post-imperial condition. It became clear that West Europe achieved its distinction through the production of 'zones of indistinction' outside Europe. Decolonization spawned the homecoming of these zones into the centres that had disseminated them, which induced the gradual disintegration of the West European nation-states. In fact, it was already with the Holocaust, which made the colonial atrocities return like a boomerang into the heart of Europe (Césaire 2000, 36), that West Europe entered the turbulent post-imperial condition. Through its internal imbalances, fissures, and divisions it was forced to confront the uncanny of its imperial past. The recent rise of populist and fascist ideologies as well as secessionist developments in West Europe testifies to a Europe-wide re-emergence of the human 'animal' residues.

Nonetheless, the recent engineers of the idea of Europe continuously refuse to face Europe's responsibility for this 'return of the repressed' by blaming it on the benighted 'non-Europeans'. It is for them, they say, that the 'proper Europeans' have to relentlessly expiate and sacrifice their distinct identity. For example, Julia Kristeva interprets 'progressive' Europe as the carrier of Montesquieu's *ésprit général*, a historically guided 'texture of many singularities' (Kristeva 1993, 32–33). She states that unlike non-European civilizations inimical to contamination and overlaps with other traditions, Europe from the outset exemplified an exogamous society stipulating alliances outside the bloodline (Kristeva 1991, 45–46). Its single distinctive trait is a persistent self-othering. Another prominent thinker, who interprets Europe's sacrificial self-de-identification as the prerequisite of its universal mission, is Zygmunt Bauman. He argues that unlike other cultures that are unaware of being distinct because they are unrelated to the others, European culture 'feeds on questioning the order of things – and on questioning the fashion of questioning it' (Bauman 2004, 12). This ultimately turns it into an infinite task of self-interrogation.

However, bereaving the idea of Europe of its geopolitical and historical background until it becomes such an indistinct trope, involuntarily uncovers the repentance of its creators. To illustrate this, we can point to how the myth of a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual Central Europe equally erased its past atrocities. Displaying the same significant elusiveness as the myth of an

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all-emancipating Europe, 'Central Europe' acquired prominence after an almost complete extermination of the region's Jews, the deportation of its Germans, and a radical reduction of linguistic and ethnographic heterogeneity in its newly established nation-states. In the 1920s and 1930s when the myth first arose in Friedrich Naumann's version, this remorseful evocation of what has never existed tended to recover the lost German imperial power; in the 1980s and 1990s, when it resurged with Milan Kundera, it aimed to undo the Soviet homogenization of the region (Wolff 2013; Todorova 1997, 140–160). In both cases, the *political* objective of the myth's carriers contaminated *ethical* cosmopolitanism as an attitude allegedly germane to 'Central Europe'.

To introduce the final case in point, the delineated tendency to treat Europe as the epitome of self-othering comes to expression in its frequent association with the rootlessness of the Jewish identity (Liska 2017, 127–136). Indeed, Gustav Mahler's triple bereavement of the Jews of their homeland (Beller 1989, 207) and Karl Kraus's entire dissolution of the Jews into a mere ferment of surrounding cultures (Kraus 1898, 23) illustrate the fertilizing potential of the Jewish extreme (self-) dispossession. However, making the Jews and Europeans into the guardians of universality obliterates in both cases the distinct historical trauma that induces their remorseless self-othering.

Conclusion

It is time to summarize the delineated post-imperial developments in East Central Europe after the First World War and West Europe after the Second World War. The elites of both 'Europes' experience their past as traumatic, attempting to remedy it through the establishment of either a *distinct* (as in the case of East Central Europe) or an *indistinct* European identity (as in the case of West Europe). Unable to get rid of this traumatic entanglement of distinction and indistinction at its heart, the idea of Europe ultimately presents itself as double-edged. This is the reason why, in dealing with it, as with all other common-sense ideas that tend to naturalize their referents, one should be wary not to take it at its word. Despite its homogeneous appearance, the gap in its midst undermines its integrity. The idea of Europe is something that we want to explain, rather than to explain things *with*. It is not a self-evident toolkit but a site of an uncanny encounter, which does not promise a harmonious reconciliation but requires an uneasy cohabitation with its inassimilable leftovers.

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