

***Danube* by Claudio Magris as an Example of a Postmodern Construction of Central Europe¹**

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The rediscovery of Central Europe

THE 1980s saw an intensive political and cultural debate on Central Europe. Questions were raised as to whether Central Europe could be seen as a specific historical and geographical region, whether there was a distinctive Central European identity, etc. This debate was instigated by Central European intellectuals, first and foremost by the Czech Milan Kundera with his article 'The Tragedy of Central Europe'.² The same year saw the publication of the Hungarian Jeno Szücs' work *The Three Historical Regions of Europe*.³ Unlike Kundera, Szücs did not claim that Central Europe was part of the West but his scientific analysis of history still gives clear support to Kundera's idea, namely that Central Europe is in its essence separate from Eastern Europe, represented mainly by Russia. Other Central European intellectuals, among others the Poles Czesław Miłosz (cf Miłosz 1986) and Adam Zagajewski (cf Zagajewski 1987) or the Hungarian György Konrad (cf Konrad 1985) have made claims in the same vein.⁴ It was obvious that in this construction of the concept of Central Europe they had a number of aims. The intention was to show

¹ For the inspiration for this article I owe many thanks to professor Kristian Gerner. He gave me Magris' book when it came out in Sweden 1990 and encouraged me to lecture on it.

² Kundera's article was first published in the Swedish journal *Ord och Bild* in 1983 and its English version appeared a year later in *The New York Review of Books*.

³ This work was first published underground in 1980 in Hungarian. Its first official publication in 1983 was in English, in *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*.

⁴ For more about the debate on the concept of Central Europe among Polish, Czech and Hungarian intellectuals see Świdorski 1988.

the West an image of the Eastern block that was not a monolith, so that Western intellectuals and politicians would notice the small countries and nations that had been oppressed by the Soviet Union since the Second World War and forced to accept the communist system. The aim was to make the Central European countries visible to Western opinion and acquire support for the opposition to communist regimes. The notion of Central Europe also served purposes within these countries. It fortified resistance, since, by declaring the existence of a specific Central European identity, the inhabitants in countries to the West of the Soviet Union were able to draw a line between themselves and Russia and distance themselves from the political system that country had imposed, and consequently demonstrate their cultural kinship with Western Europe. The concept of Central Europe also implied an idea of a common history for all Central European nations. It had an integrating effect and helped create a feeling of solidarity among Central Europeans which was imperative for the cooperation between intellectuals in opposition to the regimes (e.g. between Charta 77 and the intellectuals in Solidarity).

However, the concept of Central Europe was not created in the 1980s, even if it is a relatively modern term. It was already used, vaguely, in the Habsburg Empire of the mid-nineteenth century, in discussions about establishing an economic union which would embrace regions from Trieste to Copenhagen with Austria and Prussia as its centre of gravity (Judth 1990, 24). However, this idea never became a reality and the concept of Central Europe did not appear again until the First World War when Friedrich Naumann published his political work *Mitteleuropa* in 1915. He understood the term to cover those territories between the West and Russia which were under German cultural influence. Naumann considered that a Central Europe divided into a number of nation-states had no chance of survival. He wanted to establish a common Central European market and dreamt of Central Europe being united in some kind of confederation under German control, since it was the German element which would hold the region together. Naumann did, however, acknowledge that all Central European peoples in the future German-dominated Central Europe had the right to their cultural autonomy (Bugge 1995, 93). Yet those Slavic peoples in the region whose nationalism had come to life in the 19th century did not accept this in-

terpretation of the concept of Central Europe, since they saw the Germans as the main opponents to their own national aspirations.

After the German defeat in the First World War, the politicians in the new states created by the Versailles Treaty came up with their new visions of Central Europe. The president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk (1918; 1934), and the Czechoslovak prime minister, Milan Hodža (1942), defined the territory as a region consisting of small nations between Germany and Russia. It was necessary for these small nations to cooperate in order to oppose the expansionism of their large neighbours.

Similar thoughts can be found in the years 1918-1921 in Poland among the people surrounding Piłsudski, the marshall and leader of Poland. He dreamt of creating a confederation of states between Russia and Germany, and considered cooperation in defence policy imperative for Central European states. Of course, neither Czechoslovak nor Polish politicians saw their dreams of a consolidated Central Europe come true.

After the Second World War Central Europe was absorbed into the political sphere of the Soviet Union. One would think that there was no room for a 'Central European project' in this polarised Europe. However, some Central European intellectuals had never given up this idea. Already in 1946 the Hungarian sociologist Istvan Bibo took up this theme and wrote about the shared history of the Central European states.⁵ Polish historians in exile, e.g. Oskar Halecki in the 1950s and Piotr Wandycz in the 1970s, claimed that the countries of Central Europe were united by a shared history and culture, especially democratic traditions and values.⁶ The same viewpoint was advocated by the Polish cultural review *Kultura*, published continuously in France since the end of the Second World War (Korek 1991, 23-29). The notion of Central Europe, or East-Central Europe, was thus alive among emigrants from this part of the world and was presented to Western intellectuals in historical and literary works, e.g. Czesław Miłosz' *Rodzinna Europa (Native Realm)*. However, these works were given no broader response in the West until the 1980s. First then did the West become interested in the concept of Central

⁵ All texts by Bibo can be found in: Bibo, I. : *Osszegujtott munkai*, 1-4. Bern 1981-1985. Szucs (1983) refers to this publication.

⁶ For an account about the development of the historiography in the period 1918-1994 focusing on Central Europe as a special region see Kłoczkowski 1995.

Europe, and this interest led to a profusion of works, articles and essays. Relevant texts by Central European intellectuals were then translated into English, German, French and Italian. Western reviews dealing specifically with Central European issues emerged, such as *Autre Europe* in 1984 or *East European Reporter* published from 1986 onwards (Judth 1990, 32). Interest in Central Europe increased during that decade and reached its climax in the early 1990s, i.e. just after the breakdown of communism in Central Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The question that needs to be addressed is why Central Europe was discovered by Western intellectuals precisely in the 1980s ? What factors were behind this development ?

In his article 'The Rediscovery of Central Europe' from 1990, Tony Judth makes an in-depth analysis of the political factors he considers crucial for this development. One of the most important was the loss of faith in Marxism in the West. A large part of the Western intelligentsia had been staunch Marxists in the period 1945-1980. The belief in Marxism culminated in 1968 in the student revolts around the world, and the so-called radical intelligentsia withstood for a long time disappointments such as the invasion of Hungary 1956 or of Czechoslovakia 1968 by Warsaw Pact troops. Belief in Soviet communism was replaced by a faith in a Chinese, Cambodian or Albanian way to social justice. Later, after the revelations about Mao, Pol Pot and Hodxa it was, however, increasingly difficult to keep up that faith. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan 1979 and the rise and fall of Solidarity 1980-81, the fate of Marxism as a strong current among Western intellectuals was sealed. Only with the demise of Marxism did Western intellectuals become attentive to the Central Europeans' discourse on shared democratic traditions, political rights, shared ethical values and the need to protect the individual against powerful political systems. This opened the door for communication between Western intellectuals and oppositional intellectuals in Eastern and Central Europe. A certain empathy for the fate of Central Europe emerged in the West—an empathy that could be discerned both to the left and to the right. Their views on Eastern and Central Europe in the 1980s were no longer diametrically opposed, a fact which was symptomatic for the decreasing polarisation in Western politics in the 1980s, when the lines between left and right became more blurred after the breakdown of the Marxist utopia.

Another important factor behind the rediscovery of Central Europe in the 1980s was the intensification of the 'European debate'. It was during those years that the transformation of the European Economic Community into a European Union was put forward, with a European federation in mind. This led Western intellectuals to discuss the essence of Europe, European or Western European identity, and the place of non-Western European nations in Europe.

If Germans, Austrians and Italians may from a historical and cultural point of view be classified as Western Europeans and thus be considered obvious members of the envisaged European Union, what would then be the place of Slovenes, Czechs, Poles and Hungarians, whose history has been so closely linked with those nations? It is not without reason that the interest for Central Europe has been greatest in Germany, Austria and northern Italy. In these countries, the debate on Central Europe dealt with German, Austrian and Italian identity respectively, and their settling of accounts with the past. The intellectuals there used (Judth 1990, j 1)

the concept and example of Central Europe to renew and recast cultural and political debates at home[...], conducting domestic housecleaning with imported equipment.

Thus the rediscovery of Central Europe in the West coincided with and was stimulated by the fall of the Marxist utopia and the intensified debate on European integration. However, research and social analysis have hitherto not paid sufficient attention to the fact that it also coincided with another process, namely the establishment of postmodernism as a prevailing current in European culture. It is true that there is no clear demarcation between modernism and postmodernism, and a number of postmodernist ideas can be traced back during the entire 20th century; however, most scholars agree that a complete formulation of the ideas of postmodernism and their entry into the broad cultural circuit took place in the mid-1980s (Jawłowska 1991,45).

A thesis which will be put forward in this article is that Western intellectuals found in the concept of Central Europe an adequate point of departure for the articulation of a number of postmodernist ideas. They found and highlighted features in Central European culture which could be used as reference points when speaking of postmodern culture. In a sense one can speak about a projection of the

Western vision of postmodern society and culture onto an imaginary Central European landscape. Thus Central Europe was constructed as a postmodern landscape.

A good example of this postmodern construction of Central Europe is, I suggest, Claudio Magris' book *Danube*, published in 1986. Magris is professor of German-language literature at the University of Trieste in Italy. This background explains to a large extent why Magris identifies Central Europe with territories having once belonged to the Habsburg Empire. *Danube* can be seen as a kind of literary record of the travel undertaken by the writer along the river Danube in the early 1980s. The book received considerable attention throughout Europe and was translated into a number of languages, Swedish among them. This shows that the representation of Central Europe that emerged from the book was seen as relevant and had its place in the ongoing debate. In the following I shall analyse *Danube* as a memento of its time, from the cultural debate of the 1980s, and show how the author implicitly projects postmodern ideas onto the Central European landscape.

Postmodern culture and *Danube*

The term 'postmodern' is used in a variety of contexts and in connection with different spheres of activity. We talk about 'postmodern' art, music, architecture and literature, and of 'postmodern' philosophy and 'postmodern' research. The adjective is also used in descriptions of social and political attitudes and ideologies, and for describing a type of consciousness that is typical of postindustrial societies. In this article we will use the concept 'postmodern culture' in a very broad sense in reference to the current that has been predominant in the cultural life of about the last fifteen years, and that has emerged in opposition to the basic concepts and values of modernism and the modern project. Such a definition with the many simplifications and generalisations it implies is the basis for our discussion of the postmodern features of Magris' book.

One of the constructive features of postmodern culture is that it refutes the ideals of Enlightenment and the modern project, such as

Reason, Rationalism, Truth, Progress and 'Modernity' as important values in their own right. *Danube* is permeated with a settling of accounts with rationalism and its heritage. One of the fundamental contrasts in the book is the one between the Central European Habsburg Empire and Germany with Prussia at its head. The first one is symbolised by the Danube, the latter by the Rhine. The Danube represents plurality, a melting-pot of nations and a culture characterised by self-irony and suspicion against all things, while the Rhine stands for the will to segregate and purify (even from a racial point of view) and for a culture that is obsessed with the belief in order and universal values that ought to be valid everywhere (Magris 1989, 25-33) The German colonisers who for centuries were an important element of Central European culture considered themselves to be, according to Magris (32A, bearers and diffusers of these values: order, progress, rationalism. This gave them a feeling of superiority and made it difficult for them to be assimilated with the surrounding peoples. In his book Magris closely traces the vanished German culture in Central Europe (cf the chapter on the Germans in Transylvania, for instance). The Second World War, nazism and its defeat meant an end to this culture, and it is no coincidence that the same factors also meant the end for 'the project of modernity' and its ideal. The bearers of civilisation turned out to be capable of the cruellest crimes against humanity. In the 20th century, the belief in the value of civilisation was thus rocked in its foundations. However, up to about mid-century, the idea that dominated was that the cruelties of the World Wars were an expression of human 'primitivism' and 'lowest instincts'. After the 1950s an increasingly stronger conviction emerged that the cruelties of the 20th century were the consequence of the triumph of rationalism over ethical considerations in modern life. A number of postmodern thinkers (for instance Lévinas 1993; Bauman 1989; Giddens 1996) have written about the modern human being who denies his own moral responsibility for the other human being by referring to scientific authority or social theories which, with rational arguments, explain what is useful for society.

In his book, Magris joins these thinkers and presents German culture as a culture embodying 'modern' values, while the Habsburgian i.e. Central European culture represents 'postmodern' values. This is well illustrated by two plays that Magris summarises. The first play is from 1851 by the German author F. Hebbel. It tells the story of

Agnes Bernauer, a beautiful daughter to a barber from Augsburg, who was drowned in the Danube in 1435 by order of Ernst, Duke of Bavaria. In this way the duke wanted to prevent dynastic conflicts which would undermine the Duchy of Bavaria, since the son of the Duke had married Agnes and thus committed a misalliance. Agnes was sacrificed for reason of state. Hebbel justifies the violence against Agnes. Sympathy for the individual victim is suppressed; 'necessity of history' goes before the individual.

This German play is contrasted with the Austrian playwright Grillparzer's play *The Jewess of Toledo*. Its action centres around the murder of the beautiful Jewess Rachel, a mistress to the king of Castile. The Grandees of Spain killed her because they considered that, because of his love for her, the king was incapable of acting, and the kingdom was exposed to enemy aggression. Grillparzer's play, too, is about reason of state and the individual, but he does not defend the perpetrators. A crime is not less criminal because it is committed for reasons of state. Grillparzer does not justify anybody. Central European culture, as presented by Magris, aspires, as does postmodern culture, to defend the individual, and it refutes any belief in the necessity of history, in any form of 'Weltgeist'. This culture 'is not blinded by the Hegelian identification of reality and rationality' (113). The end does not justify the means.

Postmodern culture demythologises the great narratives of modernity, such as the dialectics of the spirit, class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat, belief in constant progress or the dream of a welfare state constructed according to the rules of social engineering. They are declared Utopias and lose their validity. Neither are there any universal values that can legitimise them.

In *Danube* Magris describes Central Europe as the theatre of the world, where we have witnessed the downfall of many ideological convictions and great revolutionary hopes (197). Vienna was once a city where both fascist and communist ideologists refined their arguments in animated discussions (e.g. Hitler, Lenin, Trotsky, Lukács). However, the Viennese spirit is, according to Magris, the opposite of these (188)

men of Modernity who believed in absolute truths, loved reasoning in strong categories and organised the world into systems. [...] Vienna is the city of the post-modern, in which reality yields to the depiction of itself and of appear-

ances, the strong categories weaken, and the universal comes true in the transcendental or dissolves into the ephemeral, while the mechanisms of necessities engulf all values.

Vienna embodies what has happened in Western societies these last decades: the creators of culture have relinquished their ambitions for a great settling of accounts with the social systems in force. Instead of a struggle they are playing and toying with interpretations : 'Culture as a spectacle seems to have defeated the idea of revolution' (*ibid.*). The fundamental values of Central European Vienna are the same as those of postmodern culture, i.e. radical pluralism and tolerance. 'Live and let live is the old Viennese attitude.' However, the history of Vienna and of Central Europe is at the same time a warning for the postmodern being, a warning that liberal tolerance can easily turn into cynical indifference which can be summarised by the motto 'die and let die' (190). Vienna can be seen as a satire on 'postmodern arrogance disguised as cheerful and tolerant fatuity' (188).

Magris implies that the history of the Habsburg Empire has many lessons to teach the postmodern human being who questions the value of rationalism, since it shows how rationalism can run amuck and turn into absurdity. The multiethnic empire was kept together by the person of the monarch, the law, the army and the bureaucracy, i.e. a kind of institutionalised rationality. Yet during the 19th century it appeared that this was not enough to legitimise the state to its inhabitants. An experience of rationalism turned into absurdity is thus an important theme in Central European culture. It is most fully expressed in the literary writings of Kafka, Musil and Broch. One can argue that it is no coincidence that their works were rediscovered in the second half of the 20th century when the criticism of the ideals of modernity intensified.

At the end of the 18 th and the beginning of the 19th centuries the Habsburg rulers tried to follow the example of the 'enlightened' European monarchs and modernise the empire. The Enlightenment was a time when the rulers changed roles from 'game-keepers' to 'gardeners' (Bauman 1987, 51-67), i.e. they were no longer content with watching the society they reigned over but began to intervene with its construction and functions.

Modernisation gathered speed. This process resuscitated many conflicts in the Habsburg Empire. The multiethnic Habsburg mosaic

of peoples resisted the drive towards uniformity which was part of the modern project. Therefore, with time, the imperial power changed its tactics. 'Rather than violating and absorbing society—or rather, the various societies—the state attempts to touch them as little as possible' (Magris, 244). The emperor did not 'wish to impose some rigid unity on the various peoples, but to let them be themselves and live together in all their heterogeneity' (*ibid.*). This was a temporary balance which hid a series of tensions and conflicts, and therefore the peoples of the Empire were strongly critical towards this order of things. Only after the fall of the Empire and the experience of life in totalitarian systems, did the peoples of central Europe begin to see the advantages of the bygone Habsburg Empire, and a nostalgia for a Central European culture emerged which resisted the modern project. This resistance today connects Central European culture with postmodern culture, Magris claims.

Central European culture is described in *Danube* as a culture defending the ephemeral, the marginal, the secondary. These are elements that inspire a postmodern intellectual. When great social projects and universal ideas have disappeared, people try to orientate themselves by means of criteria derived from 'local discourse' and 'small narratives'. The interest in local cultures, even defunct ones, is growing today. Magris himself expresses this sort of interest when during his journey along the Danube he makes detours to Banat in Rumania and Bukovina in the Ukraine, in order to trace the disappeared German and Jewish cultures. He also devotes a section to the vanished Tatar and Circassian cultures in Bulgaria (343f). Nostalgia is evident in these sections.

The interest in local, peripheral cultures has its origin in the radical pluralism of postmodern culture. The periphery is said to have the same value as the centre, local cultures offer their own value systems and truths. There is no absolute truth. Magris applauds something he calls Central European irony. He says that Central Europeans have learned from history that there are no absolute truths. One example is given in the chapter on Hungary (239-288) where he talks about the rule of János Kádár. He points out that the Hungarians considered Kádár a traitor and a hangman when he was made leader of Hungary by the Soviet regime after they had crushed the Budapest revolt in 1956. In the 1970s, however, Kádár was seen by many Hungarians as the great reformer of the country, when he gradually and

under cover began to introduce market economy and increased the opportunities for Hungarian intellectuals to make contacts with the West. Does this mean that the second viewpoint annihilates the first one? Magris answers in the negative: both opinions are valid and complement each other. Just because a certain phenomenon is judged positively today does not necessarily imply that it was always a good thing. Reality is manifold, not one-dimensional. The truth is defined by perspective. It is relational, but not relative. Here again, Magris shows himself to be the postmodern thinker. Some of the philosophers of modern times have considered all moral judgements as relative and therefore advised others not to deal with them, contrary to postmodern thinkers, who consider the ethic dimension important. The postmodern distancing from the ideals of the Enlightenment, such as reason and truth, have also led to the decrease in the authority of science. Postmodern thinkers such as Foucault (Lindgren 1991, 318-344) have revealed science as a system of power which in the modern world has replaced religion in its function as supreme authority, source of norms and of legitimising argument. *Danube*, too, expressed doubt in the value of science. The people of the Enlightenment believed that Knowledge could turn people into better beings. This is denied by the experience of history, implies Magris when he reflects upon the concentration camp in Mauthausen and about doctor Mengele, whose birthplace Günzburg he visits. The same thought appears in the chapter 'The Sacristans of Messkirch', where he muses on Heidegger's support of nazism. The conclusion implied is that the intellectuals can no longer claim a privileged role in society, can no longer pretend to be bearers and watchmen of the highest universal values.

In Magris' book we also find the scepticism of the postmodern thinkers as to the way science has been conducted up till now: the chase for objectivity and a comprehensive picture, eagerness to classify, categorise and polarise, a rigid willingness to systemise and to define. In the chapter with the significant title 'Two thousand one hundred sixty four pages and five kilos and nine hundred grams of Upper Danube', Magris describes the achievement of a certain engineer Neweklowsky—a scientific work in three volumes about the upper course of the Danube, seen from every possible angle: nautical,

meteorological, biological, historical, philological etc. Neweklowsky's Danube, Magris writes, is 'the synchronic knowledge of All' (61):

Obere Donau [for Neweklowsky] is a universal Donau: it is the world, but at the same time his own map, the AH that contains even itself. [...] the Engineer [...] arranges, classifies, schematizes and subdivides his encyclopaedia into chapters and paragraphs, and equips the text with appendices, indices, illustrations and maps. Born in 1882, the Engineer has a passion for Totality, the daemon of systematization which inspired the great 19th century philosophies. He is a not unworthy disciple of Hegel or Clausewitz: he knows that the world exists to be put in order, and so that its scattered details may be bound together by thought. (60)

Magris writes ironically about the strivings of science towards a comprehensive picture and quotes Kierkegaard: 'Every totality [...] is an offering made to the derision of the gods' (*ibid.*). He ponders on the meaning of science of the kind that Neweklowsky and others have pursued.

Postmodern thought refutes totality as a category in favour of open, moveable structures in constant change. Therefore, the postmodern intellectuals are fascinated by every state of 'liminality', i.e. a situation 'in between', a formless condition, where neither the old nor new rules apply. Hence the interest of postmodern thinkers for all kinds of border areas. For Magris Central Europe is one big borderland, an area where East meets West and where different nations, cultures and religions have lived side by side. Life in a cultural and national melting-pot leads to questions about identity. In his book Magris often mentions writers and artists who lived in the towns of the Habsburg Empire, where people of different ethnic backgrounds mingled. He claims that it is quite impossible and meaningless to define the nationality of e.g. Freud, Kafka, Canetti and others. What is to be taken into consideration? Ethnic roots? Mother tongue? The claim of the person himself ? Their identities were manifold and complex. With their experience of unclear identity the Central European beings announce the postmodern being. Magris writes:

...a typical Habsburgian character, the heir and orphan of that many-nationed crucible the disappearance of which had left behind it a profound feeling of not belonging to any precise world, but also the conviction that that elusive identity—composed of mixtures, suppressions and elisions—was not simply the destiny of the children of the Danube but a general historical condition, the being of each and every individual. (Magris, 194)

The postmodern being who constantly changes place of residence, work, family and sometimes even sex, shares with the historical Central Europeans the feeling of insecurity, ambivalence and alienation. Postmodern thinkers (Magris being one of them) who are obsessed by issues of identity, recognise themselves in the literary works written at the beginning of this century by authors in the Habsburg Empire, e.g. Kafka, Broch *et al.* The constant quest for identity unites postmodern intellectuals and intellectuals from Central Europe.

There are other things in *Danube* which connect Central Europe to the Europe of today, such as the dreams of constructing a supranational community and the confrontation of these dreams with flourishing nationalist ideologies. The Habsburg Empire had the ambition to create a *hinternational* community within the state, a world 'behind nations'. The ruler addressed his subjects as 'my peoples' and the national anthem was sung in eleven different languages. In the cities there was actually quite a pluralistic and supranational mixed culture. Half of the population in the towns of the dual monarchy was bilingual, and about 5 millions were children of mixed marriages (Bugge 1990, 6). The situation was, however, quite different in the countryside, there the local ethnic groups, Jews, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Germans, Serbs etc, lived their own lives, side by side but separately. Magris describes the alienation and prejudice among these groups by relating his grandmother's tales of her childhood. According to one of these tales, the inhabitants of the same village, Germans and Serbs, lived as neighbours, but when the war broke out in 1914 they were prepared to kill each other, and only fear of the enemy's revenge held them back (the chapter 'The wise Councillor Tipoweiler'). Magris is aware of the fact that the cohabitation of the Central European peoples was not idyllic. He considers this discussion relevant in today's Europe striving for integration.

To keep remorselessly reminding oneself of the defects and dark places of all of us, and of our very selves, could be a promising basis for living together in a civilized and tolerant fashion—more so than the most optimistic claims flaunted by any official political declarations. (297)

According to Magris, those who today discuss a unification of Europe can learn a lot from the history of Central Europe. They can learn a lot about cultural plurality—its creative force and its dangers. Moreover the German issue, the role of the Germans and their place,

was an important element of Central European politics. Here is another parallel between Central Europe at the turn of the century and Europe at the end of this century : 'Today, questioning oneself about Europe means asking of oneself how one relates to Germany' (32). Postmodern thought leaves behind the linear concept of time. It talks about the end of history, in the sense of history as a constant advance towards a specific goal. It is no longer believed that humankind becomes more perfect in the course of history. The myth of progress, of constant movement forward is scrapped. There is no longer belief in an advance towards a fairer society through class struggle. History has no beginning and no clear end. There is no clear continuity either. Past, present and future overlap. Every change is a movement and not a result of somebody's intentions. The theory of chaos, with its description of molecules in movement, always in quest of a new balance, is today an inspiration for those who want to describe historical and social processes.⁷ This new concept of time is apparent in *Danube*. Magris turns the river itself into a metaphor of history. During his travels along the Danube he can find neither the beginning of the river, its actual source — on the end of the river, its mouth. The delta of the Danube becomes a thousand streams that trickle out into the Black Sea. The Danube can also be seen as a metaphor of the time of nature as contrasted with human historical time—and this opens up a space for philosophical questions about the relationship between human culture and the existence of nature. Where is the place of the human being in the cycle of nature? Only the river, i.e. nature's phenomenon, represents continuity in *Danube*. Otherwise, different periods and points of time are mixed most freely in the book. According to Magris lack of continuity is something that Central Europeans have experienced long before the postmodern being:

Every heir of the Habsburg era is a true man of the future, because he learnt, earlier than most others, to live without a future, in the absence of any historical continuity (266).

It has been said about postmodern culture that it creates the representations of representations without attaining what is behind them (Jawłowska 1991, 48). Realism is gone, replaced by illusionism. Post-

⁷ For the presentation of chaos theory and the discussion about its possible uses in many scientific disciplines see Prigogine & Strangers 1990 and Gleick 1996.

modern art and literature play with traditions and styles. It is extremely intertextual. Postmodern culture speaks with other people's voices and uses masks and poses. So-called elitist culture mingles with mass culture. *Danube* fits well into this description. The book refers to records of travel as a genre, but breaks with the framework of that genre. The traveller actually records very little of what he sees during his travels. Every place he visits is instead a point of departure for cultural and historical accounts of people from history, writers, musicians and artists that have a link to that place. He does not follow any chronology in the presented facts and does not care about structuring them in any kind of pattern. In his presentation writers from different periods meet and converse with each other. There is a profusion of quotations from different works. A great number of voices reach the reader. Magris moves in the sphere of so-called high culture but he also refers to various mass culture phenomena. Cervantes and Buster Keaton meet in the same chapter.

It emerges in a number of places in *Danube* that Magris, when describing Central European culture, has today's postmodern culture in mind. The Viennese culture announces for him postmodern culture with its specific mixture of kitsch and sublime art, operetta and symphony. In 19th century Vienna it could be observed how culture was transformed into industry, a culture industry that today has taken on hysterical forms. The Baroque—that architectural style which left its imprint on Central Europe—is the quintessence of art as illusion. The Baroque mixed the fantastic and the elevated with the grotesque. The play of the Baroque between appearance and reality is familiar to Magris the postmodern visitor. He writes at the same time about Central European and postmodern culture when he makes the following judgement:

The fictions of danubian culture, its ironical dissimulations, help us to elude the intolerable scandal of pain, and to carry on. We must be grateful to these fictions, then, even if that is all they can do. (246)

Some conclusions

The popularity and extremely positive reception of *Danube* proves that the book made an important contribution to the debate on Central Europe in the 1980s. Therefore it is highly relevant to ask what representation of Central Europe the book shows us. I hope that I have provided at least a part of the answer to this questions by the arguments about *Danube* and postmodern culture outlined above.

Danube is actually not about Central European reality in the 1980s and not about reality at all. The author does not seem interested in the life of Central Europeans today, in their daily existence. He moves in the world of art, literature and philosophy. The Central Europeans he meets on his journey are intellectuals who speak several Western languages, while Magris does not speak any Central European language apart from German. What he notices in the Central European cultural world is everything that leads his thoughts to the state of Western European culture in the 1980s. Magris is fascinated by Central European culture, because he thinks he finds there an embryo of postmodern culture. He picks out and highlights in his description those features in Central European culture that can inspire a postmodern intellectual, e.g. its 'marginality', 'liminality', plurality, its overlapping and dissolution of identities, an intense feeling of insecurity, the dissolution of Authority, the breakdown of all utopias, the dismissal of rationality in history, existential irony and the play between appearance and reality. In that way, Central Europe appears from the darkness of oblivion as the Mecca of postmodernists.

By way of a rhetorical question Magris asks whether the concept of Central Europe is a 'horse' or a 'unicorn', i.e. if it refers back to a reality or if it is only a figment of the imagination. Some of the critics of the book (e.g. Bugge 1990) have claimed that while Magris makes a claim for the first, he opts for the latter, he presents the phenomenon as the most obvious thing in the world. Here I disagree. The Central Europe of Magris is a unicorn, a literary and artistic creation. Its representation is not derived from the empirical experience of the author, which one would take for granted for a record of travels. All that the writer-traveller sees is filtered through his earlier reading. The Central Europe of Magris is derived from the world of art and books. The author does not even seek a realistic description. He

plays with representations of the representations of others, which is often done in postmodern art.

Magris' representation of Central Europe is not free from mythologisation and nostalgia, but as a true postmodern thinker he is well aware of that. When he writes about the history of Central Europe he claims 'The past has a future, something it becomes, and that transforms it' (252); he is well aware of the fact that people cannot avoid projecting their present and their visions of the future onto the historical events they analyse.

It is tempting to compare Magris' description of Central Europe with the travel accounts from Eastern Europe in the 18th century which L. Wolff presents in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe*. The people of the Enlightenment quoted by Wolff constructed Eastern Europe as the opposite of the West, i.e. as an uncivilised part of Europe, exotic, wild and in many ways frightening and repulsive. For Magris, the postmodern author who has distanced himself from the ideals of the Enlightenment, there is no 'civilization' as a positive evaluative category. In his construction of Eastern and Central Europe this part of the world is attractive and worth noticing, among other things, because the traps of civilisation were revealed here in very clear way and before anywhere else. Magris' Central Europe is different from Western Europe, but at the same time a natural part of the continent. The destiny of Central Europe announces the destiny of the whole of Europe. Creators of culture in Central Europe, writers, philosophers and artists were early in seeing through the dead ends of Modernity and they have sown the seeds of postmodern culture, the fruits of which we can see today. The representation of Central Europe in *Danube* is constructed according to postmodern poetics which in the 1980s and 1990s became some kind of 'Central European' poetics. Representations of Central Europe were constructed during much of the 1990s following these conventions.

Thus Central Europe was discovered by Western Europeans as a postmodern landscape, 'liminal', contradictory, in perpetual movement, unknown, fascinating and inspiring. This image of Eastern and Central Europe is more flattering for its inhabitants than for instance the representation of the region by the people of the Enlightenment, but it has just as little to do with reality and it is also turning into a

stereotype. Perhaps this is not the most important aspect of the matter. What is important for Central Europeans is to remain in the awareness of Europeans, not to be left outside. Perhaps the postmodern construction of Central Europe can serve this purpose.

LUND

(Translated from Swedish by Margareta Faust, Ph.D.)

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