

DISCUSSION

WHY *CONTRADICTIONS?*

A Belated Manifesto

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Abstract

In the following essay-manifesto, Contradictions editor Joseph Grim Feinberg lays out his view of the journal as a platform for confronting the central contradictions of post-communism, working through the problems of Central and Eastern Europe in global context, and seeking the continued contemporary relevance of the history of emancipatory and critical thought. Contradictions, he writes, should enable philosophy and its neighboring fields to engage with this region, at this moment, while telling world history something that no other time or place has told it before.

Keywords

Post-communism, Central and Eastern Europe, Communist history, history of ideas

As *Contradictions* enters its second half-decade, it's time to point to a few of the principles that frame our work. In other words, what are we trying to do here?

In the brief editorial statement that accompanied volume 1 in 2017, we expressed our intention to “critically engage our history and our current moment”, to “move beyond the simple dichotomy of East vs. West”, and, finally, to “go beyond the limits of what is known as ‘post-communism’, not by ignoring the specificity of this region, but by placing it in global historical context”.¹ In other words, three simple areas of coverage: *our moment, our region, world history.*

¹ “Editorial”, *Contradictions* 1, no. 2 (2017), p. 5.

We specified, a little:

Examining our present *moment* meant facing “the contemporary problems and contradictions of neoliberalism, that is, of capitalist society in the specific form it took during the period when Communist Party rule in East-Central Europe ended”.² It was here, after all, that neoliberalism during its heyday was at its barest and boldest. From here the neoliberal world could be observed from the shoulders of its vanguard. And even now, more than three decades after the region’s Communist Parties slunk away or donned more fashionable garb, after new political waves have beset the now-hunched and weary champions of neoliberalism, the condition known as “post-communism” refuses to die. The present continues to be shaped by a repeated refusal of a misremembered past.

Examining this relationship to the past meant, then, examining the *region* where our journal is based, because this region is largely defined in the cultural imagination by the experience of Communist Party rule, and of the historical trajectories that led to it and ultimately away from it. But we charged this journal also with the goal of opening up historical narratives, in order to understand the history of Central and Eastern Europe as something more than a succession of more and less repressive regimes. Our authors have explored the emancipatory and critical forms of expression that emerged in the region, in the movements that preceded the Communist-led regimes, within the contradictory structures of those regimes themselves, and in those regimes’ chaotic and equally contradictory aftermath. Looking back at the region’s intellectual history, we saw how many inspiring and incisive thoughts remain “half-forgotten”,³ still buried under the rubble of failed upheavals, strayed revolutions, ambivalent emancipations, and pompous acts of reaction.

We expressed the conviction that, in looking back on these often-neglected traditions, our authors would “contribute to the development of emancipatory thought on a global scale [...], bringing the specific perspective of East-Central Europe into contemporary discussions of radical critical thought, developing a dialogue between traditions, and providing a platform for this dialogue”.⁴ In other words, we aimed to reclaim a place for the critical thought of this region within *world history*.

In the hurry of the moment, however, we left a few things unsaid. We asserted that “post-communism” offers an excellent vantage point for understanding neoliberalism, but we did not delve into the contradictions inherent to the post-communist condition. We hinted that the spatial reality of “East-Central Europe” (or, more inclusively put, Central and Eastern Europe) is determined by the geography of Communist Party rule and by the attempts to rewrite this geography under post-communism, but we did not

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

draw out the specific contradictions that have resulted from the ideological clashing of “East”, “Center”, and “West”. We declared our intention to rescue half-forgotten traditions from oblivion and introduce them into contemporary theory, but we said nothing about the methodological implications of such a move.

Five years on, it's time to fill in the blanks – to provoke debate on what's at stake and to clear paths for future work.

The Contradictions of Post-Communism I. After a Post-Communism That Refuses to End

The time is clearly ripe for a critique of post-communism. The time might even be over-ripe, since by many accounts post-communism is already old and rotting. After all, one of the most penetrating critiques of the social situation in this part of the world, Boris Buden's *Zone of Transition* from 2009, bears the subtitle “*On the End of Post-Communism*”.⁵ If only Buden's provocative implication had already come to pass! Yet communism, more than thirty years after its own reported death, continues to haunt the region's politics. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, neoliberal reforms are still carried out in the name of fighting communism, while corrupt capitalist politicians are pilloried as “communists”. In Poland and Hungary, meanwhile, anti-liberalism is pursued under the same anti-communist banner. This spring, the Cold War itself seemed to have returned, when a struggle against the imperialist capitalist regime in Russia was presented in the Western and Central European media as a struggle against residual communism – even while Russia's ruler proclaimed that he was the one struggling to overturn the Soviet legacy, which was allegedly responsible for favoring non-Russian nationalities at the expense of Russians.⁶ It appears that even after communism ceased to exist, the world had to reinvent it as an ever-lurking revenant.

There can be no doubt that a serious crisis has come over the social and cultural formation that spread after 1989 from East-Central Europe to the whole world. There are signs that the post-communist *dispensation* – that is, the generalized arrangement through which power relates to humanity⁷ – is coming undone. Its economic doctrine was undermined by the crash of 2008, and its liberal-conservative political hegemony was undermined by the rise of illiberalism soon after. Throughout Europe and North

⁵ Cf. Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs – Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009). See Neda Genova's review of the book: “The End of Post-Communism?” *Contradictions* 2, no. 2 (2018), pp. 225–232.

⁶ See, e.g., Putin's “article” from July 12, 2021, in which the Russian president (or a ghost writer) offered historical justification for the eventual annexation of parts of Ukraine, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁷ Cf. William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013); see chapter 1, “Performative Dispensation: The Elementary Forms of Mass Publicity”.

America, the political elites of triumphant liberal democracy and open markets have seen their grip on power loosen, and throughout the world national elites have been seeking new allies, weakening their dependence on the Western powers that briefly seemed to rule the world unopposed. There was an epoch when neoliberalism imposed itself by declaring all else dead; now that epoch itself shows symptoms of terminal illness.

Yet even as that epoch's political legitimacy passes, the central categories that structured it remained largely as they were in the early 1990s. In the new, post-communist dispensation, labor and class were conceptually excised from society, and when they later reappeared, they were not confronted as questions of malleable social organization, but were re-categorized as aspects of deep-seated personal identity, markers of belonging to a hard-working nation and markers of distinction from allegedly non-laboring ethnic minorities and cultural elites who disrespect national tradition. Even society itself largely disappeared as an entity of its own, conceptually replaced by aggregates of individual citizens, associations, and ethnicities. In place of the social, the category of the political took center stage, sometimes supplemented by categories of politicized culture. Politics was denigrated as a sphere of immoral machinations, but at the same time it was held up as a space for potentially moral action, for exercising freedom as an end in itself; the social conditions and social results of policy became an afterthought. Because the political was primarily about individual morality, social utopia was banished from the polis, and there emerged in its place a counter-utopia that was supposed to be simple, pragmatic, and realistic, not governed by any vision that looked too far ahead. Moral individuals were given license to overlook the plight of society as a whole, because grasping society as a whole requires formulating the idea of "society as a whole", something seemingly too hard to grasp and too risky to try to ameliorate.

As a result of these processes, the leading ideas of post-communism were applied within a narrow range of acceptable politics, prevented from operating as terms of deeper critical critique: "democracy", "civil society", "freedom", and "human rights" were increasingly emptied of their historically significant emancipatory content, removed from the realm of legitimate debate, and mobilized selectively as ideological justifications of the established order. These ideas, developed in response to problems of an earlier period, were never updated to respond to their present. Eventually, in their emptied-out form, they offered a convenient foil for the illiberal conservatism that would present itself as an alternative to neoliberal post-communism, even while it maintained the fundamental categories that shaped post-communist power. Ascendant nationalism and xenophobia may question some tenets of liberal orthodoxy, such as minority rights and open borders, but they do so in the name of other principles that have dominated post-communist discourse, such as the celebration of the citizen (who is called to defend himself against non-citizens) or asocial democracy (redefined as the rule of the cultural majority over minorities, but still refusing to acknowledge questions of social order or conditions of labor as relevant topics of democratic debate).

Contradictions, as I see it, is not here to offer calm, disinterested analysis of this state of affairs. The journal has an interest, a social aim, and this aim should be made manifest: we take part in the search for what comes after the “end” of post-communism, and our work helps ensure that what comes next is not worse than what it is replacing. At a time when few people still believe in the essential emancipatory mission of the unbridled market, even fewer people are willing to offer a coherent vision of how to bridle it. The political horizon has been fixed in place by post-communism; only a critique of post-communism can enable political mobilizations to see beyond that horizon.

But because post-communism draws its governing power from temporality – from its negation of the past – the critique of post-communism must also involve a critique of what post-communism came after.

The Contradictions of Post-Communism II. After a Communism that Never Was

We are told that since the revolutions of 1989–1991 we have been living “after” communism. Insofar as this statement has truth value, it is not because communism once really existed as a social system and then ceased to exist. It is because post-communism exists in the present as a declarative negation of an imagined (yet simultaneously unimaginable) past. In the current dispensation, communism exists as a symbol of whatever post-communist governance wants to be ended. The specter of communism can be invoked to induce horror at public ownership, private poverty, women’s emancipation, retrograde traditionalism, social equality, old-fashioned hierarchy, dangerous foreign ideas, benighted local ideas, Russian and Ukrainian immigrants, Western youth activists, excessive idealism, cynical corruption, worker control, workers themselves – whatever is more easily defeated by conjuration and exorcism than by argument.

This is not to say that nothing “really” changed with the onset of post-communism. There can be little doubt that the beginning of “post-communism” marked a major historical transformation. But the work published in *Contradictions* shows that this change is not understood best as an economic or political transition away from communism as such; the alleged communist character of the old regimes should be a question for debate, to be answered concretely with regard to each site and moment, in relation to the play of forces that sometimes realized and sometimes inverted historic demands of the socialist movement. What ended *as a whole* in 1989–1991 was not communism as a configuration of society, but rather a reality in which communism was *imaginable* as a point on the political horizon. What came into being was a new reality where communism was imaginable no longer. If the terms “communism” and “post-communism” are relevant to us today, it is because they draw attention to shifting social categories, which reconfigured social understanding of the possible and the desirable.

The post-communist dispensation is, in an important sense, a “condition”: It conditions what we are able to imagine and what will be heard when we speak. It conditions our political horizon, making alternatives to the present invisible and closing off spaces of

potential emancipation. It conditions our experience of the past and future, associating radical reimaginings of the future with an already-rejected past. In this condition, communism appears as nothing but the frightening negation of the possible and reasonable, which takes the form of a warning against excessive desire. The communism of post-communism appears as a desire for pure good that becomes inverted as evil. This is a figure of negative theodicy, which justifies the evil of the present by pointing to an evil that supposedly derives from the unbridled desire for something better. Communism becomes sacralized as taboo, repeatedly exorcized from the order of the real.

Under post-communism, communism disappears as a *movement* and a player in *history*. Lost from view are the real contradictions of communism as a set of organized desires and practical experiments, the peripeteias of a movement that moved repeatedly against itself, but continued to move. And so the critique of communism (or pre-post-communism) is obviated by the sacral ban placed on it. Today, a proper critique of communism, one that breaks the sacral ban on desiring something better, can finally clear the way for new visions that draw on the past without demonizing it or repeating it.

Looking at the social systems that legitimated themselves with the ideal of communism, we can ask how those systems functioned, how they emerged and (mostly) “ended”, how they were criticized, and how the legacy of opposition to them can challenge our contemporaries to think of alternatives to post-communism in new ways, envisioning possibilities more adequate to the future because they take into account the past. As we look back on the circuitous and often tragic historical developments that led to “communism” and its “end”, we can also look back on the ideas and aspirations that accompanied this history. Rather than delegitimizing these ideas and aspirations *a priori*, we can look at them in their complexity, asking how some ideas took hold but were transformed, how other ideas may have always contained the seeds of their own eventual negation, how still other ideas were at least partially realized while others were marginalized and never had the chance to be tried.

The Contradictions of Central and Eastern Europe I. Where Is *Contradictions*?

The post-communist dispensation encompasses the world, and every critique of the present must be, in one way or another, a critique of post-communism. But there is probably no better place to look into the depths, genealogy, and aftermath of post-communism than at its unfortunate center, the region where the phenomenon popularly known as “communism” so abruptly lost its status as a global force thirty-some years ago. This is also a good place to look into post-communism’s missed alternatives, ideas that long confronted the reality of Communist Party rule but were summarily discarded when post-communism arrived and declared itself immutable and irreplaceable.

Contradictions appears in one of the centers of this center, in a region often referred to as “Central Europe”. This is both a blessing and a curse. The term sounds out as a curse when invoked by those who would place themselves above the more backward “Eastern Europe”, which seems always to begin just a little way beyond where the speaker

happens to stand; since Central Europe is not quite Western, all sorts of deficiencies can be blamed on its incomplete Westernness. At the same time, since Central Europe is not quite Eastern, its proponents can renounce their connections with Europe's allegedly primitive oriental margins. But these ambiguities also open possibilities: Central Europe provides a vantage point for critical engagement with both West and East – and with the ways in which the idea of centrality has been invoked to privilege (or “centralize”) certain ideas while marginalizing others. By confronting the term, we can begin to understand the specificity of the whole region that has been struggling for centuries to negotiate its position beside a hegemonic West; this has sometimes meant establishing counterhegemonic powers and ideas in the East, while at other times it has meant racing to become more Western than the West.

This vantage point allows *Contradictions* to focus its critical lens on the East, while granting due attention to the West as an area that continually influences the East – and which, much more than is usually noted, is itself shaped by the East. The thematic range of *Contradictions* is not enclosed within the borders of Central Europe. The ambivalent, border-filled space of Central Europe merely offers a frame through which to see what goes on all around. In addition to all those parts of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe ruled by Communist Parties for much of the twentieth century, we should draw attention to the ambiguous position of places like Finland, Austria, Germany, and Greece, which are typically subsumed under the “West”, yet bear significant marks of their historic entanglements with territories of the “East”.

But even this geographical delimitation is not enough. Prague is a window to Central and Eastern Europe, which is a window to the world, a window that shows the world in a specific (and not always flattering) light. Because this region is entangled in the world, the whole world belongs to our geographical domain – the whole world, as seen from this part of the world, and every part of the world, as seen beside this part.

This is the region's perverse advantage: it has grappled with capitalism and anti-capitalism in some of their most problematic forms. Social critics in Central and Eastern Europe have experienced brutal fascist governments and powerful socialist movements. They have analyzed, based on intimate personal knowledge, the systems of governance that took on the name of “socialism”. And they have lived through an imposition of market capitalism that took place with unprecedented speed on an unprecedented scale when the region's allegedly anti-capitalist governments fell. They lived through revolutions that overturned all manner of ordinary thinking, opening up possibilities that may have later been foreclosed, but were never exhausted; today they can look back on such revolutionary moments, not as fixed models to be mechanically repeated, nor as pure ideals that remain untouched by later betrayals, but as impulses to think beyond the close, dark horizon of the present.⁸

⁸ And these revolutions, however opposed to one another they may appear, cannot be separated. As one observer puts it: “the postsocialist horizon forces us to restructure our desire for commun-

The Contradictions of Central and Eastern Europe II. Caught between Center and Margins

A claim to centrality can be a claim to superiority or an acknowledgment that one lives amidst others; it can be a claim to purity or a recognition that one lives at the heart of a maelstrom of colliding influences. Do we live in the center of the world or in the overlapping margins between other centers?

Central and Eastern Europe has become a center for one-sided cosmopolitanism and for one-sided xenophobia. It has led attempts to erase local difference and assimilate to Western models (justified by the claim that we are at the “center” of the world’s most important continent), and it has led attempts to build walls around national culture or an idealized “East”, eliminating all that does not belong (justified by the implication that when one is in the center of the world, there is no need to look elsewhere). In spite of this, but also because of the challenge set forth by this dubious legacy, Central and Eastern Europe has also historically been a center for reflecting on the problem of internationalism. It is often forgotten that it was here that the world socialist movement held its lively early debates on how to navigate the Babel of languages and traditions that threaten to divide humanity, how to find a way of living and fighting together without eliminating the differences between us. It was here that so-called Austro-Marxists – including socialists of many nationalities in the Habsburg lands – worked out concrete proposals to grant national cultural autonomy without dividing up multinational communities. It was also here (when Stalin was in Vienna and Lenin in Krakow) that the Bolsheviks began working out an alternative policy calling for territorial autonomy and national self-determination. It was in the southeastern part of Central and Eastern Europe that Yugoslavia launched one of history’s most ambitious attempts at internationalist organization within a single state. If these programs have been largely annulled and these theories ignored, giving way to the patchwork of feuding nationalisms that run much of the region today, this should be reason enough for investigating this history and asking what could be done better.

This task is made all the more urgent by the new war in Ukraine, the most violent expression of competing national claims in recent times and the most damning sign of the post-communist dispensation’s failure to resolve international tensions in the region, guaranteeing independence and equality for national and cultural groups. For all Russian talk of anti-fascism and cross-border solidarity, and for all Western

ism as an inverted echo of October’s tragic outcome. Instead of rejecting the Russian revolution for its failures, suspending it in any number of counterfactuals about the post-Leninist phase, or – conversely – mythologizing it as a glorious historical rupture while disregarding its later fate, the postsocialist communist recognizes her formation in the fires of a different revolution entirely. Our connection to the event of 1917 must inevitably pass through the neoliberal revolution (or counter-revolution) of 1989/91.” Jonathan Brooks Platt, “Postsocialist Platonov: The Question of Humanism and the New Russian Left”, in *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia*, ed. Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), p. 220.

talk of multicultural coexistence, throughout the post-communist period none of the great powers permitted Ukrainians to act autonomously, to associate freely with their neighbors, and to choose on their own whether they should take sides or avoid taking sides. The calamitous approaches of all international parties in the lead-up to the war of course does not change the fact that only one party launched a deadly invasion, and there can be no equality in responsibility or blame. But we can ask why Ukraine was not even considered a “side” in the pre-war period at all, but was treated as a third party in negotiations over its own land and society.

The post-communist dispensation did not permit Ukraine to have its own history and simultaneously be a part of Western and Eastern history. The world powers competed in offering Ukraine bad economic deals and empty military proposals, while punishing Ukraine each time it began to work more closely with the other side. On a cultural level, Ukraine was never enabled to consolidate itself as a multilingual, multiethnic state. World powers portrayed Ukraine’s major languages as symbols of competing allegiance, and Ukrainians were never given the freedom necessary to develop their languages as their own, sheltered from the hegemonic claims of Russia or “Europe”.

Instead of working through the real problems left by Soviet nationality policy, proponents and critics of Russian influence simply equated communism with Russia. To be clear, there is some truth to the assertion that Putin is attempting to revive Soviet territorial claims and to enact Soviet policies of Russification. But this is a half-truth. It is true that Lenin’s program of anti-imperialism was beset by contradiction and eventually transformed into its own type of imperialism. But Soviet policy was still marked by the attempt to overcome earlier imperialist policy. Although the Ukrainian national movement (*pace* Putin) was born entirely independently of the Bolsheviks (it was generally more agrarian-populist socialist than proletarian-Marxist in its early period), the Bolsheviks responded to it by granting Ukraine the status of an autonomous republic in union with Russia, and this status, though practically undermined by later Communist Party practice, became the basis of Ukrainian independence when the Soviet Union dissolved.

The Soviet Union formally supported but practically denied political autonomy to its constituent nations. Even when it periodically displaced or starved non-Russian nations under Stalin’s rule, and even when it incentivized Russian assimilation (after renouncing Stalin’s most violent methods), making the Russian language a mark of prestige and a means of career advancement, the Soviet Union never stopped promoting cultural autonomy as a matter of principle. This was a volatile set-up, which encouraged non-Russian national sentiment and simultaneously suppressed it, while the weight of power always favored Russian over non-Russian culture. But this was not quite the same as one-sidedly forced Russification. (By way of comparison, with due attention to great differences of context and method, the United States and Canada have assimilated and eliminated minority cultures – including the culture of millions of Ukrainian immigrants – far more completely than the Soviet Union ever did.)

Ukraine emerged from the Soviet Union having been encouraged to be both independent-Ukrainian *and* Russophone-Soviet. The delicate balance of Soviet nationality policy had collapsed, but no viable new idea came in its place, no new approach that really learned from the failures of Soviet policy and sought to reconcile those contrasting cultural orientations and models of governance. Add to this the refusal of all power blocs to actually guarantee Ukraine's security, even while they happily provoked one another, with each side declaring its desire to eventually bring Ukraine under its wing – and add to this the desperate thirst of Russia's humiliated post-communist elites for international glory and domestic distraction – and it was a recipe for disaster. A disaster with no internationalist solution yet in sight.

But the war in Ukraine has at least forced the West (for now) to recognize Ukrainians as people bearing a complex history and intermingled cultural traditions, rather than as backward Easterners who are “White but not quite”, to use the phrase of anthropologist Ivan Kalmar.⁹ The war has drawn attention to the layered chauvinisms that allow the Central European attitude, wherever it happens to be, to dismiss whatever lies farther to the east, while counter-chauvinisms arise to violently confront that dismissal. The war (at least one may hope) has opened up the possibility of seeing the centrality of Central and Eastern Europe differently, as a kind of marginal centrality, which offers a vantage point in between other centers and margins. People in Central and Eastern Europe, reflecting on their position at the margins of the center, may be able to recognize the marginality that is present everywhere, because every center is shaped by its margins, and nothing can be central without being located between other centers, located at the intersection of their overlapping margins.

In *Contradictions* we can continue to push at the boundaries of what Central Europe means and what is relevant to it. Our pages can be open to all such central peripheries and peripheral centers around the world. From this standpoint, then, we can offer a space for the development of critical and emancipatory theory that is Central and Eastern European but also worldly, arising out of the critical assessment of situated and global iterations of “communism” and “post-communism”.

The Contradictions of Central and Eastern Europe III. Finding Ideas in a Region without Ideas

And yet, what insight might one expect from a place that has often been seen as a region that borrows its plans and visions from abroad, implements them unchanged, pursues them with dogmatic faith – and then, after growing disappointed, turns abroad again?

Habermas notoriously characterized the revolution of 1989 in East-Central Europe by its “total lack of ideas that are either innovative or orientated towards the future”.¹⁰

⁹ Ivan Kalmar, *White but Not Quite* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left”, *New Left Review* 1, no. 183 (October 1990), p. 5.

His dismissal of the revolution's intellectual accomplishments, while partly justified, misses the point. Lea Ypi captured the revolution's significance much better when she called it a "revolution of people against concepts".¹¹ It was not that the revolutionaries simply forgot to come up with new ideas; rather, they passionately defended the remarkable idea that ideas as such were the problem, that fancy concepts should be replaced by basic common sense, lofty vision replaced by a cynical recognition of lowly human nature, complicated social theory replaced by unvarnished and obvious truth. This is how G. M. Tamás characterized the post-communist attitude in 1996, when he was growing tired of the views of his erstwhile anti-communist comrades: In their understanding, communism

forced people to accept ideology in preference to felicity. Communism is philosophic, yet free societies are pragmatic. [...] Communism forced secular, agnostic, critical discourse on pious peasant populations. Communism imposed high modernism onto traditionalist, deferential, naive moujiks. Communism was the work of a bunch of intellectualist adventurers in leather trench coats. Communism was the work of a heroic élite of doctrinaires. The source of all our troubles is ideas.¹²

Not the most propitious starting point, it would seem, for a journal devoted in large part to the history of ideas.

Yet at other moments in history this region has been the site of remarkable intellectual ferment. It was in the ambivalent space where Western and Eastern Europe overlap that Kant ruminated on cosmopolitanism and perpetual peace, Herder developed his philosophy of multi-national humanism, and internationalists later duked it out with nationalists. In between one-sided Westernizers and reactionary Slavophiles, a space also opened up for agrarian-populist socialists who mixed models of folk communalism with revolutionary modernity. If Hegelianism was perhaps born in the western half of Central Europe, it was in the east where it was most successfully popularized and reinterpreted in competing national and socialist movements. If Marxism was born largely during its author's long Western European exile, it was in many ways a product of Marx's reflections on Germany's ambivalent position between East and West, its development of philosophy as compensation for underdeveloped politics, its belated but rapid economic growth, its attempts to become a hegemon of the East (competing with Austria and Russia) even while it was denied full admission to Western sources of power and *civilisation*. And of course it was in Austria and eastern Germany, at a time when the areas' Westernness could still not be taken for granted, that psychoanalysis, phenomenology, Austro-Marxism, and logical positivism were born.

¹¹ Lea Ypi, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 151.

¹² G. M. Tamás, "Ethnarchy and Ethno-Anarchism", *Social Research* 63, no. 1 (1996), p. 169.

Even so-called “Western Marxism” took much of its initial impulse from Central and Eastern Europe. György Lukács’s turn to Marxism was among other things a result of his experience in the short-lived Hungarian Council Republic of 1919, after which he attempted to synthesize the Eastern European revolutionary experience with Central and Western European philosophical traditions. His legacy was carried on and reinterpreted, then, not only in the Frankfurt School, but also by his students in the so-called Budapest School, such as István Mészáros, Ferenc Fehér, and Ágnes Heller, and by Karel Kosík in Prague. Even Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, and the members of the Frankfurt School – those progenitors of Western Marxism who actually operated in the West – rebelled first of all against the established orthodoxy of Marxism in its *Western* form (as represented above all by the Second International), which they sought to rethink in light of the radical democratic impulse of the October Revolution.

But “Western Marxism” has no exclusive claim to critical and emancipatory thought. “Eastern Marxism” should be counted also among the many traditions to be taken seriously. Although Marxism-Leninism was codified as a legitimating ideology of oppressive states, it also contained moments of emancipatory insight. It was repeatedly rethought and invoked against itself by critical figures in Central and Eastern Europe, and many of the ideas of “Eastern” or “orthodox” Marxism remain open for critical interpretation and reappropriation. So too with the multiple varieties of anarchism, Social Democracy, non-Marxist socialism, and progressive populism that have passed through the region, as people tried to imagine alternative futures during sudden upheavals and to look for the fissures in apparently unchangeable systems during long periods of stagnation.

Critical and emancipatory theory, of course, can never be the exclusive property of one region or another. Our purpose should be to understand how critical theory has emerged from the interaction of experiences both marginal and central to world affairs. We should show that critical theory never needs to be borrowed wholesale or invented from scratch, because it develops in a continuous process of rethinking in light of new intellectual encounters and new historical experience.

The region of Central and Eastern Europe, though perennially seen as a backwater from the world’s centers of power, has repeatedly served as a testing ground for cutting-edge political-economic technology. The testing has historically taken two different forms, and the tragedy is that the first form, which keeps yielding negative results, keeps getting repeated, while the second, whose results are less negative, is still banished in the name of avoiding “dangerous social experiments”.

The first kind of experimentation applies a formula established elsewhere, only more rigidly and more ruthlessly, treating local societies as blank slates, taking advantage of their relative weakness in pushing back. This was the approach that applied the Soviet developmental model in Central Europe, where it was honed and standardized still further for export to Latin America, Asia, and Africa (and, as is so often the case, the variety selected for export was formally attractive, but of low substantive quality). Then, even after the age of experimentation was declared over in 1989, the region

became a laboratory for neoliberalism. The new doctrine had already gone through a testing phase in Latin America before being imported to Central and Eastern Europe, but it was still unproven; once applied here it was repackaged with the added value of post-communist ideology, which greatly contributed to its export still farther afield.

The second kind of experimentation, by contrast, avoids rigidly applying imported models, but finds in the liminal position of Central and Eastern Europe the possibility of trying *new things*. In this list we may count the workers' councils of 1905 and 1917, the experiment in internationalism and workers' self-management in Yugoslavia after 1948, the Prague Spring in 1968, and even some aspects of Hungary's pragmatic and liberalizing "goulash communism" after 1956; if we are loose enough in our demarcation of the region, we might add the creative urbanism of Red Vienna after 1918.

Most of these experiments – with the arguable exception of Red Vienna – ended in some sort of failure, but every experiment fails in its own ways and should teach us something new. Yet today, instead of learning from failed experiments, policy makers in Central and Eastern Europe have perpetuated the worst features of all the failures, while ignoring most of the successes. The specters of half-failed experiments are exorcised in order to make room for living monsters.

The Contradictions of History I. Historicization and Radical Anachronism

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx famously wrote that “[t]he tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”.¹³ The “nightmare” Marx invoked, more precisely translated as “mare” (in German, *Alp*, a sort of night-elf), is a demon that appears in dreams to sap the dreamer's life force away. Such “spirits of the past”¹⁴ divert revolutionaries' attention from new things, pulling them from contemporary reality into deathly sleep. Marx stood against his demons, declaring that “[t]he social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future”.¹⁵ He had a point – but what should we say to the revolutionaries of the twenty-first century, whose future has been taken away? What should we say to those whose only remaining future seems to lie hidden in old, recurring dreams?

Yes, when we now look back at the past, it is full of demons, far more numerous and more frightening than in Marx's day. But given the real possibility of imminent global climate catastrophe or nuclear war, the demons of the future are hardly less terrifying. At the same time, we also meet livelier ghosts whose melancholic sighs tell us (in the voice of Enzo Traverso) that melancholy might just offer a path back to forbidden optimism,¹⁶

¹³ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 595.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 597.

¹⁶ Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

and whose eternally dying breaths whisper (in the voice of Svetlana Boym) that nostalgia just might have a progressive future.¹⁷ Of course, we have no need to be nostalgic for the concrete reality of “really existing socialism”; nor should we be melancholic when we contemplate *its* end. This is precisely why we should look to the past by way of dreaming – if readers will permit this reinterpretation of Marx’s dream-demonology. The dreamer-historian approaches the past as something open, unfixed, something that has not yet revealed all its secrets. The dreamer does not simply describe the superficial appearance of past events, their manifest content as befits established narratives, their officially recognized heroes and villains, whose actions brought the waking world to where it is today. The dreamer-historian also dives into the latent content of the past, willing to encounter not only those spirits that dominated past epochs, but also those that rebelled, were exorcised, perhaps were silenced in the act of rebelling, or perhaps hid themselves away in their epochs’ inner workings, registering without fanfare the slow and faltering steps of emancipation. The dreamer-historian, in other words, can look on the ghosts of the past as a part of living history, as figures that continue to speak to the present, with today’s researchers as their mediums. This is how we can make the history of philosophy, as Karel Kosík put it, into its own form of philosophy.¹⁸

Methodologically speaking, this means refusing to affirm the past or the present it created, refusing to see history as a smooth succession of necessities, but looking instead at each historical moment for *contradictions*: conflicting tendencies, internal tension, multiple paths forward. This is what can make even the history of ideas materialist: the recognition that ideas are not contained in rationally determined iron laws of development, independent of society, but move as socially embodied contradictions. Contradictions push substance forward in time, but always in more than one direction at once. Admittedly, it is not usually considered to be the task of historians to tell us what *did not happen*, but that is precisely the point at which a critical historiography can become political-philosophical, excavating buried hopes, suppressed dreams, and also, perhaps, overlooked demons who threaten to return. A philosophical historiography can bring old dreams and fears into the present, where they can be worked through again before an uncertain future. This approach also means doing justice to the actors of history, who did not know where events would take them; and it means remembering that even our haughty knowledge about the trajectory of the past does not tell us where events will take us tomorrow.

On this point, the radical historicization of ideas meets deliberate anachronism. We know that all ideas develop in historical context, but we also know that ideas can outlive their context and change when their context changes, and we know that writing about

¹⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

¹⁸ Karel Kosík, “Dějiny filosofie jako filosofie”, in *Filosofie v dějinách českého národa. Protokol celostátní konference v Liblicích ve dnech 14.-17. dubna 1958* (Praha: Československá akademie věd, 1958).

ideas in history is part of the process of the historical development of ideas. Ideas can speak to us years after they were born and even after they seemed to die, but at each moment they speak differently. Sometimes it takes powerful historical forces to revive them; but without the smaller efforts of subversive memory, those historical forces would find nothing to revive.

The Contradictions of History II. The History of the Present as Philosophy

But *Contradictions* is not a journal for pure historians. The present is as much our domain as the past. When our authors look at the present, they can examine how one version of the past is sedimented in the present, how contrary explorations of the past can upset the present and send it flying in new directions. They can also look for those critical perspectives and emancipatory visions that are still here, but are maligned or misunderstood or hidden from view, due to the structures of post-communism. This approach opens our pages up to anthropology and literary or cultural studies that place ideas in their changing socio-cultural context; to sociology that is truly social, attempting to grasp the form of society beyond trends and statistics; to economics that recognizes all economic policy as enmeshed in competing social visions; to political science that recognizes the whole world as political.

And in the study of the present as much as in the study of the past, the empirical analysis of contradictions should also be a contribution to philosophy. *Contradictions* seeks philosophy that is political, insofar as it attempts to understand how the world has changed and can change. It also seeks political philosophy that is *social*, insofar as it grasps the political as one dimension of broader social configurations, thus moving beyond the limited personal-moral approach and its apolitical analytical counterpart that established themselves under post-communism. By reflecting on empirical developments, philosophy should continually make itself *adequate* to its context; but by recognizing that each empirical moment is wrought with tension and conflicting tendencies, philosophy can avoid being *trapped* in its context. The ideas of post-communism have suffered from ignoring rather than confronting the history of socialist ideas. Now, when critical and emancipatory thought is finding a growing audience, it too will suffer if it merely ignores dissident and post-communist ideas. A philosophy that hopes to speak to the future should confront both the best and worst ideas of its past.

Philosophy should be able to speak to the world by finding something that concerns the world as it is, right now; but instead of telling the world what it has already heard, philosophy should tell it something new; it should make the world concerned in new ways. This, I think, is what *Contradictions* can do: In *this region* at *this moment* it can enable philosophy, along with all the theoretically inclined empirical work that surrounds philosophy, to tell world history something that no other time or place has told it. And to help make sure the next phase of history is less bad than the one that came before.

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