

THE CONCEPT OF CENTRAL EUROPE IN FRENCH HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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When studying a map of Europe, each time you want to know where you are, the first step should be to ask yourself when you are: in French historiography, Central Europe is less a spatial category than a historical concept. Thus, territorial issues always refer to questions of periodicity, a fact that explains the high complexity of this concept.¹

Different visions of this part of the world appeared during the 19th century, the Interwar years, the Cold War and the most recent era, and the questions raised by the historiography have tended to radicalize the “practices of spatialization”,² because researchers have successively reshaped their corpus, reacting to huge traumatismes such as the totalitarianisms, World War two and the Iron Curtain. And among these “discursive practices” as French philosopher Michel Foucault calls them, the concept of East-Central Europe appears to be a prevalent topic within recurrent debates: the insistence on western/eastern/central localization of this part of Europe follows the political dislocations of this space. As Sorin Antohi asserts it in the review *East Central Europe*: “Central European, Eastern European and South Eastern European Studies have witnessed a massive production of books and articles on topics from the theory of symbolic geography to the redefinition of the very notion of region.”³ Linguistic turns in the designation of the lands between Germany and Russia, as they are often labeled, became “spatial turns”, repeatedly proclaimed.⁴ In fact, we have about Cen-

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1 Paul Gradwohl (ed.), *L'Europe médiane au XXe siècle. Fractures, decompositions — recompositions — surcompositions*, Prague: CEFRES 2011.

2 Sorin Antohi, “Introduction : Symbolic Geographie, Comparative Histories”, *East Central Europe*, Vol. 32, Parts I–II, 2005, pp. 1–3.

3 *Ibidem*.

4 Bernhard Struck, “Historical Regions Between Construction and Perception. Viewing

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tral Europe, exactly the same questions as the ones raised by Europe itself: where does it begin? Where does it finish? Who is or is not part of it?

What we can maintain about the definition of Central or East Central Europe in French Historiography is that it has a few persistent characteristics: a multiform culture, a fluctuating geography between West and Byzantium and fringes that constitute the periphery of the Western civilization.⁵ But above those consensual characteristics, the variety of the names shows a strong hesitation, and in fact French historians haven't agreed on this yet, and we can still read about Central Europe, East Central Europe or Median Europe. We witness a persistent trend to elaborate a single frame of reflection even if researchers acknowledge the limits of a too narrow and mobile pattern.

WHAT ARE THE PARADIGMS OF THE FRENCH DEBATE?

As French Historian Antoine Marès puts it in a recent article,⁶ studying the concept of Central Europe in French historiography leads to analyze France itself rather than this part of Europe. In France, the difficulties to define Central Europe have two origins: like anywhere else in Western Europe, these difficulties are exogenous, coming from the ethnic, linguistic, religious and political complexity of the zone; but they can also be purely French. Antoine Marès established that there were three screens in the French vision of Central Europe: the complex of intellectual superiority, the preeminence of Polish mediators and German-speaking mediators, and the perception of the German/Russian threat.⁷ From the latter derives the tendency to evaluate the zone according to strategic factors implying French security. As for the preeminence of Polish mediators, it is reflected in the relative popularity of the concept of East-Central Europe in France, especially in the last ten years. Coming at the very beginning from the

France and Poland in the Late-18th and Early-19th Centuries", *East Central Europe*, Vol. 32, Parts I-II, 2005, pp. 79-97.

5 Michel Masłowski, Didier Francfort et Paul Gradwohl (ed.), *Culture et identité en Europe Centrale. Canons littéraires et visions de l'Histoire*, Institut d'Études slaves-Masarykova Univerzita: Paris-Brno 2011, pp. 13-32.

6 Antoine Marès, „Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation de l'Europe centrale dans le discours français”, in Paul Gradwohl (ed.), *L'Europe médiane au XXe siècle. Fractures, décompositions — recompositions — surcompositions*, CEFRES: Prague 2011, pp. 195-213.

7 *Ibidem*

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Polish emigrated scholar world, this appellation seemed the best solution to escape from the purely binary alternative Eastern Europe/Western Europe. If the East-Central European paradigm is essential in the French historiography, it shows us an important characteristic of these debates about Central Europe: they are a flow coming back and forth between the West and the Middle; even during the Cold War, the debates have never been purely French, enclosed, but they were nourished by the self-understanding of Hungarian, Czech or Polish history. Indeed, articles published abroad had a strong impact in these countries.⁸ It is well known, for example, that Milan Kundera's article "The Tragedy of Central Europe" originally written in French in 1983,⁹ has initiated a wide international debate on the spatiality and territoriality of the zone. Conversely, the concept of East-central Europe has been influenced in France by the writings of Diaspora Intellectuals: scholarly studies thus have impacts on internal and external visions of this part of Europe.

Historiographical debates on Central Europe have also benefited from the more recent paradigm of "mental map". From this perspective, the main point of reference is Larry Wolff's book: *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* published at Stanford in 1994, and which had strong repercussions.¹⁰ The author demonstrates how the division of Europe into an Eastern part — backward and uncivilized — and a Western part — modern and civilized — can be traced back to the late 18th century and so, that this divide was not a product of the Cold War¹¹. In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, this question of the East/West dichotomy found a large public. Again, the same questions were asked: how to localize this part of Europe? What are the differences and similarities with France, the sameness and the otherness?

In France, the question has also been asked of the exploitation of the various concepts to designate Central Europe. It has been said that these regional classifications have not been instrumentalized in French historical research as it could have been in Hungary, Poland or Romania after the

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8 Maciej Janowski, Constantin Iordachi and Balázs Trencsényi, "Why Bother about Historical Regions? Debates over Central Europe in Hungary, Poland and Romania", *East Central Europe*, Vol. 32, Parts I–II, 2005, pp. 5–58.

9 *Le Débat*, n°27, novembre 1983, pp. 3–27.

10 Stanford University Press: Stanford,.

11 Bernhard Struck, *Historical regions op. cit.*

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Cold War.¹² But there have still been deconstructions and reconstructions in view of cultural, political and geopolitical bias. For example, Antoine Marès states that the concept of Central Europe has been indeed instrumentalized in the French views since 1870!¹³ According to him, behind this concept, there is always the defense of one nationality or one country against the others: he gives the example of Victor-Lucien Tapié who, in spite of being the most objective scholar of the first half of the 20th century, couldn't help but write a little book which was hostile to the Polish claimings on Teschen, in 1936. But at least, we can notice that Tapié's position was openly transparent, and that this opusculé was absolutely separated from his scientific publications. And of course, a lot of French studies remained, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by anti-germanism, until the end of the 20th century. After that, a more global, European vision started to emerge, trying to identify the supranational phenomena, then to analyze the multiple reactions to them. In order to build a, perhaps, less instrumentalized History of the zone, the Centre of Central and South-East Europe, founded by George Castellan at the Institut des Langues Orientales (INALCO), became in 1991, the Center of Median Europe Study, following a proposition by Antoine Marès. Its object is to promote the concept of Median Europe which appears more neutral, or less strongly linked to a context, and thus to authorize the emergence of new questionings, in a work that wouldn't be bilateral but multilateral. To avoid an artificial homogenization of the zone, this Median Europe is sub-divided into Baltic, Central and Balkan Europe.

But these labels of "East-Central Europe" and "Median Europe", or the concept of "mental map" are, regarding to historical time, recent expressions. So the question remains: in what terms does French academic tradition evaluate the region during the 19th and 20th century? And in what terms do the historiographical debates re-evaluate it from time to time?

THE STAGES OF THE FRENCH DEBATE

In 1983, the Castellan Centre at the INALCO launched a new review *Le Cahier (Zeszyt)* with, among other Foreign correspondents, Tomasz Schramm from the Poznań University, a scholar figure who happened to play

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12 Maciej Janowski, Constantin Iordachi and Balázs Trencsényi, *op. cit.*

13 Antoine Marès, "Construction, déconstruction et marginalization", *op. cit.*

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a prominent role in the French knowledge of Central Europe.¹⁴ The *Cahier's* first mission was, of course, to define its research field, and the very first issue was thus asking : “what is Central and South-East Europe?”¹⁵ These specialists worked to enlist the terms which were used to designate the zone, and they also undertook to trace the history of these terms. This content helped me to formulate the following remarks.

In French debates, even before being named, Central Europe was a political issue: in early 19th century, the questioning about liberalism, nationalities, self-determination appeared in texts dealing with Eastern Europe, while referring to Austria or Poland.¹⁶

The concept made its progressive appearance between 1850 and 1870. Before this period, the reasoning was following dynastical destinies: the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollern... We find one of the first occurrences of Central Europe in a *Grande Encyclopédie* published in 1887,¹⁷ which situates a Central Europe between the Rhine and the Dniestr. But the first real attempt to give a scientific content to this central Europe are due to French Geographers Auguste Himly and Élisée Reclus. They were the first in France to raise the issue of this zone appellation, at the end of the 19th century. Auguste Himly¹⁸ designates it as the area sprawling “from the Alps to the Baltic and North Seas”, as well as an area under the influence of the “Germanic race”. As we see, from the very beginning, general geographic factors are mixed with more suggestive appreciations. Auguste Himly himself admits that Central Europe is “such a vague term”, but that this is fundamentally what defines the zone which is “intermediary in every way”.

If we look at the context in which the concept is forged, this is no wonder that Central Europe makes its appearance just as France gets more and more worried about German hegemony, which the Government is working

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 14 For a first assessment : Tomasz Schramm (ed.), *L'Europe au XXe siècle. Éléments pour un bilan*, Uniwersytet Im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Association Internationale d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Europe, Instytut Historii UAM: Poznań 2000.

15 Georges Castellan, „Avant-propos”, *Cahier n°1*, Centre d'étude des civilisations de l'Europe Centrale et du Sud-Est, INALCO, novembre 1983, pp. 7–8.

16 Baron Adolphe d'Avril quoted in Antoine Marès, „Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation”, *op. cit.*

17 Quoted in Antoine Marès, *ibidem*.

18 Auguste Himly, *Histoire de la formation territoriale des États de l'Europe centrale*, Paris 1876, quoted in Antoine Marès, „Les Français face au concept d'Europe centrale et orientale”, *Cahier n°1*, Centre d'étude des civilisations de l'Europe Centrale et du Sud-Est, INALCO, novembre 1983, pp. 11–21.

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to surround with the Franco-Russian alliance. For in the same time, the Russian empire takes a greater role in French opinion: the idea is that on the European continent, the Slavic world could counter the German influence by helping to “degermanize” a large part of Europe. From this point of view, one of the main figures in the French debate was Louis Leger (1844–1923), for he was the first to free himself from the German screen : as a pioneer in the study of the Slavic languages and civilizations, he could have a free access to the Slavic sources. He could indeed speak Polish, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Russian and Slavonic.¹⁹ This knowledge helped him to publish in 1879 a *History of Austria-Hungary*, which highlights the Slavic populations among the “German and Magyar races”.²⁰ As we can observe, before the First World War, Central Europe largely amounts to Austria-Hungary, a fact which often leads to a guerilla between slavophile and russianophobic specialists. At the end of this first stage of the French debates, the scholar world witnesses the emergence of a prominent figure : Louis Eisenmann who had learnt the Czech language, and whose work had a lasting influence. As many of his French colleagues just before the war, he appeals to intern reforms of the Dual Monarchy, which could lead to national autonomies in an Austro-Hungarian frame. During the war, he is eventually converted to the project of Czechoslovakia. And in 1921, he will publish a book titled *The Czechoslovakia*.

We see that Central Europe remains marginalized in the French vision before 1914, for two main reasons: firstly, it is considered as the periphery of Western Europe, especially as their economic exchanges with France remained weak, and secondly, it is an area that looks difficult to seize because of its state discontinuity. In France more than anywhere else, jacobinism put an insidious screen between Central Europe and their French observers, and in this case, it was easier to confuse the region and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

After the Great War, this first notion of Central Europe is blown up, as fast as French interest increases. The French public learns about the “successor states”, and as Louis Eisenmann’s writings show, Germany is excluded

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19 Paul Boyer, „Louis Leger (13 janvier 1844–30 avril 1923)”, *Revue des Études Slaves*, vol. 3, n° 3–1–3, 1923, pp. 127–132.

20 Antoine Marès, „La vision française de l’Europe centrale, d’un prisme à l’autre, du XIXe au XXe siècle”, in Gérard Beauprêtre (ed.), *L’Europe Centrale. Réalité, Mythe, enjeu XVIIIe–XXe siècles*, Éditions de l’université de Varsovie: Varsovie 1991, pp. 377–390.

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for good from this zone, from a French point of view. In the interwar period nevertheless, we can still find references to the Central Europe, like for instance, in the huge work of Geographer Emmanuel de Martonne who used the term to highlight the fact that this is a region where influences meet, and where one can observe “an extended political instability in response to an ethnic instability”.²¹ The idea of transition thus remains. And in these geographic studies, the image of transition, of a zone in-between, in the middle, is often a simple translation, « an adaptation of the German term of *Mittleuropa*”.²² It is yet historically implied, and has very few geographic conformities since the physical features don't seem to characterize it.

As we mentioned earlier, French interest is more than often linked to strategic considerations, and this is above all true for the interwar period as George-Henri Soutou's studies deciphered for the French scholar world.²³ As soon as the year 1918, the debate expresses the fear of an imbalance due to the disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian pivot. While calling for a way to establish a confederal link between the states of the region, the specialists can't conceive Central Europe as a whole, but as an aggregate of national categories, the one they called successor states.

And the focus on French security interests is well reflected in Jean Mousset's work, a man who studied in the thirties and succeeded to Professor Ernest Denis at the Sorbonne chair of Slavic History and Civilization in 1945. As a matter of fact, his little book *Mittleuropa ou Europe centrale*²⁴ which was published in 1945, provides one of the last occurrences of the term “Central Europe” in After-war France. Indeed, after World War Two, it withdrew, as “Eastern Europe” replaced it, which can be considered as an ideological victory for the USSR. The successive political crisis, from 1956

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 21 Emmanuel de Martonne, *Géographie universelle*, t. 4 : „L'Europe centrale”, 1930, quoted in Antoine Marès, „Les Français face au concept d'Europe centrale et orientale”, *op. cit.*

22 Pierre George, *Géographie de l'Europe centrale slave et danubienne*, 1968, quoted in Antoine Marès, *ibidem*.

23 G-H. Soutou : „La politique économique de la France en Pologne (1920–1924)”, *Revue historique*, n° 509, 1974 ; „L'impérialisme du pauvre : la politique économique du gouvernement français en Europe centrale et orientale de 1918 à 1929”, *Relations internationales*, n° 7, 1976 ; „L'alliance franco-polonaise (1925–1933) ou comment s'en débarrasser ?”, *Revue d'histoire diplomatique*, avril–décembre 1981. I. Davion et J. Kloczowski et G-H. Soutou (ed.), *La Pologne et l'Europe du partage à l'élargissement (xviiiie – xxie siècles)*, PUPS: Paris 2007.

24 Paris, Éditions du Chêne, 1945, cité par Antoine Marès, „Les Français face au concept d'Europe centrale et orientale”, *ibidem*

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Hungary to the emergence of Solidarność, progressively shattered this vision. But in 1945, the Russian screen began slowly to replace the German one. It didn't happen within a day, since the feeling of a German threat remained very alive in France. Still in February 1947, French foreign Minister George Bidault declared to Warsaw and Praha his Government's intention to conclude alliances with them: this gives a proof that despite the semantic evolution from Central to Eastern Europe, the political appreciation of the area can be different.²⁵ In this case, George Bidault's motivations presented different levels: strengthening the bridge between Central and Western Europe while reinforcing the international position of France; erasing Munich but also thwarting the influence of USSR: a wish that the intrusion of Joseph Staline in the so-called "bilateral negotiations" proved anachronistic. And the French perception of the Soviet threat had the effect to move Central Europe towards the East. For example, at the INALCO in 1946, a chair is created of Eastern Europe Geography, History and Civilization. Some publications, such as the « Courrier des Pays de l'Est » (« The Eastern Countries Mail ») show how these lands are interpreted, more than anything else, as dependant from the Soviet system. This is the reason why the Historians who were eager to free themselves from this heavy current trusteeship, in order to adopt a deeper perspective, had to find another designation. These scholars of the 1960s and the 1970s rather talked of Danubian Europe for they were often under the influence of the Habsburgs prism — which explains why Romania was often absent from their pattern. This is the case with Jean Bérenger²⁶ or Victor-Lucien Tapié²⁷ who published a history of *Monarchies and Peoples of the Danube* while professing about the "Central and Oriental Europe" at the Sorbonne. In fact, the term of Central Europe never totally disappeared: this is a title that can occur from time to time in the French production.²⁸ Thus, despite the strongly cleaved political context, the difficulties to define the zone did not vanish. Still in the seventies, the American Historians, issued from the emigration, mainly the Polish one, benefited from a real influence on the French historiography. This explains the emergence of the notion of East Central Europe, in the aftermath of the work, for example, of Paul

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25 Paul Gradwohl (ed.), *L'Europe médiane au XXe siècle. Fractures, décompositions — recompositions — surcompositions*, CEFRES: Prague 2011, 285 p.

26 *L'Europe danubienne de 1848 à nos jours*, PUF: Paris 1976, 263 p.

27 *Monarchie et Peuples du Danube*, Fayard: Paris 1969, 493 p.

28 Jacques Droz, *L'Europe centrale*, Payot: Paris 1960, 287 p.

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L. Horecky and Janina Wojcicka: *East and East central Europe : periodicals in English and Other West European Languages*,²⁹ and ten years later : *East Central Europe : A Guide to basic Publications*.³⁰ The definition was based on civilization facts : it was the “border of the Western civilization “, but above all the countries of Jan Hus, Copernic, Chopin, Dvořák... We can see that the idea of transition was still performative, but the proper characteristics of the zone were emerging in the discourse.

At the beginning of the eighties, the concept of Central Europe re-emerges in accordance with three factors.³¹ The first one is historical : the cultural re-discovery of the end of the 19th century ; the second one is intellectual : the acknowledgement of the diversity hidden behind the Berlin Wall; and the third one is political: the growing feeling that this part of the continent could be the advanced post of struggle for freedom, against the East. In his speech in front of the European Council on the 30th of September 1982, President François Mitterrand addressed his audience in these terms: “We could talk about absent ones. After all, they are also part of Europe”. He took the opportunity to remind the leaders of the European Community that for centuries, “Central Europe” had been sharing a common civilization with the West. Still, further in 1989, what François Mitterrand had in mind was not the enlargement of the European Community to the Soviet bloc, but a European confederation taking its roots in the Helsinki Agreement.

The appellation of Central Europe reappears simultaneously in France — where it designates mainly Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland³² — and in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Of course, there is the resounding article written by Milan Kundera. But the French also reacted to the writings of Václav Havel (and his speech at Toulouse University where he was made doctor honoris causa in 1984) and of György Konrád: they speak of Central Europe, or of the East of Central Europe. In the scholar world, the book of the Hungarian historian Szúcs, *Les Trois Europes*, prefaced by Fernand Braudel³³ was also very popular. These Central European figures had

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29 Library of Congress: Washington 1958, 126 p.

30 University of Chicago Press: Chicago, London 1969, 956 p.

31 Antoine Marès, „Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation”, *op. cit.*

32 Michel Masłowski, „Culture et politique en Europe centre-est”, in *L'Europe du milieu*, Presses Universitaires de Nancy: Nancy 1991, pp. 9–25.

33 L'Harmattan: Paris 1985.

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a real influence on the French debates on two points in particular : asserting that their region was not Eastern Europe, but neither was it a “Western part currently in the East.”³⁴ Among the influent intellectuals of this time, we can notice that Adam Michnik did not participate to these peculiar discussions. As Timothy Ash wrote in his 1986 article “does Central Europe exist?”, the concept of Central Europe is notably absent from “the hectares of samizdats which are cultivated in Poland”, proving that the East remained really important in Polish history.³⁵ At the same time, Czesław Miłosz admitted he belonged to Central Europe as a *Weltanschauung*, with different values than the ones in the West. He thus suggested that Eastern Europe was a reality whereas Central Europe was an idea.

And in fact, in the French historiography of the eighties, the concept of Central Europe seems to designate an “imaginary continent”.³⁶ This doubt on Central Europe which would be more a dream than a reality, lead historians to speak of “the invention of Central Europe” or of “the re-discovery of Central Europe”. “The invention of Central Europe” is an expression you can find in a book published by Paul Gradwohl, Didier Francfort and Michel Masłowski.³⁷ The latter uses it as the title of the introduction: Central Europe was a concept which was “invented” during the eighties. Being deprived of their own political institutions, the central states had their identity strongly linked to the cultural questions, to theirs canons. They so promoted a definition of themselves which wasn’t based on a description of the current reality. Antoine Marès for his part would rather speak of a “rediscovery” of Central Europe in the eighties: the French started to refine their knowledge of this part of Europe which they less and less considered as a whole labeled “the countries under Soviet domination”. As the iron curtain was shaken, cultures of Central Europe were re-exposed to the Western public as a matrix of our modernity: the birthplace of psychoanalysis, relativity, genetics, modern music...³⁸ As we can imagine, this movement was impregnated with nostalgia for the Secession Vienna, the

 34 Timothy Garton Ash, „L’Europe centrale existe-t-elle ?”, *Lettre Internationale* n°10, automne 1986, pp. 3–13.

 35 But the term of Central Europe was used by the political analyst Zbigniew Brzeziński in *Znak* en 1989.

 36 Antoine Marès, „Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation”, *op. cit.*

 37 Michel Masłowski, Didier Francfort et Paul Gradwohl (ed.), *Culture et identité en Europe Centrale*, *op. cit.*

 38 Antoine Marès, „Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation”, *op. cit.*

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Austro-Hungarian Empire, so the main part of this Central Europe was still considered as a periphery, not an addition of centers. In this turning point of the eighties, the debates highlighted the extreme diversity of languages, religions and even past destinies; so the scholars worked on defining a unity — apart from the communist domination. — by following three influences: a relatively late Christianity, the nobiliary democracy, Humanism and Renaissance. Historians then used an anthropological and interdisciplinary approach in order to seize the paradigm of Central Europe as a cultural community.³⁹ Again we have this pattern: Eastern Europe as a reality, the Yalta order, and Central Europe as an idea, a cultural unity of arts, attitudes or ways of life. We can understand why this vision gave rise to controversy. This Central Europe would be pure mythology made from literary commonplaces. Thus Daniel Beauvois denounced a false paradigm that in fact defined a past community cut off the rest of the world, “where a few socio-cultural similarities served as *raison d’être*”.⁴⁰ In 1989, he called for an approach that would distance from the national myths: from Beauvois’ point of view, the concept of Central Europe would belong to the past, but would now be instrumentalized in order to suit Western opinion. Daniel Beauvois thus suggested to talk of Europe, in order to adopt a global approach away from the “little homelands”. Other actors of this controversy at the end of the eighties, the sociologists put forward that this specific Central Europe belonged to an enlightened elite, but that their inquiries seemed to show that the youth in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, refused this Central European identity: they felt like they received it from the West and that it drove them away from the Western world.⁴¹

I said earlier that during the eighties, Central Europe re-emerged as the advanced post of struggle for freedom. This was accompanied with the idea that in this part of the world, the old French memories of resistance were reviving. Indeed, French interest was also aroused because the values that were in crisis in Western Europe seemed to be renewed there : through the Solidarność experience, for example, the French saw a rejuvenated civilization.

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 39 „Vers un paradigme de l’Europe centrale : attitudes religieuses et comportements sociaux”, in Michel Masłowski (ed.), *L’Europe du milieu, op. cit.*

40 Daniel Beauvois, „Ne nous trompons pas de paradigme”, in Michel Masłowski (ed.), *L’Europe du milieu, op. cit.*

41 „Vers un paradigme de l’Europe centrale : attitudes religieuses et comportements sociaux”, in Michel Masłowski (ed.), *L’Europe du milieu, op. cit.*

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Then the nineties were the years of the disenchantment, because of the persistent political instability in the area, and because of the atlantism. Besides, at the beginning of NATO expansion in 1997, and during the following years, question was asked whether East Central Europe was not turning to be “more occidental” than Western Europe, since it was proving to be more atlanticist. In spite of everything, the French public showed a growing interest that lead scholars to question again the concept of Central Europe, which generally designated the Višegrad group.⁴² They worked to put forward the similarities behind contextual crisis.

The 1990s saw the collapse of Cold War historiography which was built on the postulated difference between Eastern and Western Europe: “the interpretative framework of scientific debates about the region changed profoundly [...] and prepared the ground for new perspectives. As the political map of the continent was redrawn, what became visible were both the violently ethnocentric reinterpretations of ‘national cultures’, as well as an equally vocal yet publicly much less visible countertrend criticizing these national narratives, and attempting to go beyond them. In addition, a rejuvenated Central European region, blurring the politically constituted borderline between Eastern and Western Europe, redefined its cultural identity by new comparative research in social, cultural, and political history. The upsurge of international scientific communication injected new methods and terminology into research in and on East Central Europe [...] in the general creative euphoria”.⁴³ This renewing of east central European research was thus influenced by Western debates, which lead some historians to denounce an ancillary link. For example, Historian Teodora Brnardić in the review *East Central Europe* denounces the threat of homogenizing distortion in academic discourse emanating from the hegemonic West, analyzing the case of “East European Enlightenment”:⁴⁴ “Despite the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989/1990 and the ‘return to Europe’ of eight former communist states in 2004, the geopolitical Cold War concept of a

42 Gérard Beauprêtre (ed.), *L'Europe Centrale. Réalité, Mythe, enjeu XVIIIe–XXe siècles*, op. cit.

43 Dietmar Müller, Borbála Zsuzsanna Török, and Balázs Trencsényi, “Introduction: reframing the European Pasts: National Discourses and Regional Comparisons”, *East Central Europe*, vol. 32, No. 1, 2009, pp. 4–11.

44 Teodora Shek Brnardić, „Intellectual Movements and Geopolitical Regionalization. The case of the East European Enlightenment”, *East Central Europe*, Vol. 32, Parts I–II, 2005, pp. 147–178.

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homogeneous Eastern Europe appears very much alive in the grand narrative of the European history”. But we have to keep in mind that Eastern European researchers have also a reverse impact on the perspective of the western specialists.

Anyway, at the beginning of the 21st century, there was a misunderstanding between France and East Central Europe: for the latter, the integration in the European Union was a way to anchor the Western values, whereas for France, the European construction was a way to distinguish itself from the United States. In the same time, Central Europe is a field which has benefited from a historical renewal since 1990: less positivist, this research uses new tools borrowed from anthropology, as we can see in the studies of the places of memory.⁴⁵ This concept now appears to designate the Czech, Slovak and Hungarian spaces,⁴⁶ and the term of East Central Europe is more used when one wants to add Poland and Romania.

In the context of the enlargement of the European Union, several studies work on defining the borders of Europe,⁴⁷ seizing the opportunity to be delivered from a complex political frame. Since 2004, for the very first time in History, the major part of European countries belong to the same geopolitical organization, the European Union: the “kidnapped part” is back home. In the same time, the questions of the borders of Europe are asked: which country is European? Which is not? And everyone turns towards the Historians to have their answers: in 2003, when asked “what are the limits of Europe?”, former Président de la République and current President of the European Convention Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, invites the journalist to open his History books.⁴⁸ We see here how History has its place in the political debates as a transmitted scientific experience. Then we can be grateful to the French scholar world for its growing interest in the zone, as proven by the number of doctorates related to Central Europe; and the also increasing number of books with a central European topic.⁴⁹

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45 Antoine Marès, „Introduction”, in *Les Lieux de mémoire en Europe centrale*, Institut d’Études Slaves: Paris 2009, pp. 7–9.

46 Antoine Marès (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire en Europe centrale*, *op. cit.*

47 Gilles Pécout (ed.), *Penser les frontières de l’Europe du XIXe au XXIe siècle*, PUF: Paris 2004, 198 p.

48 Gilles Pécout, „Europe, que doit-on faire de ton histoire et de ta géographie ?”, in *Penser les frontières de l’Europe*, *op. cit.*

49 In this latest wave, let’s notice the to-be-published work of Paul Gradvohl: *L’Europe centrale est-elle concevable ?* [Can we conceive Central Europe?] *Les impasses de la sécurité nationale en Europe centrale : impact sur la cohérence régionale au XXIe siècle*, Mémoire d’habilitation à diriger les recherches, soutenue à Paris le 10 décembre 2009.