

The Notion of Central Europe *in* Historiography

by Krzysztof Brzechczyn

In West European development a key role in the evolution of autonomous organization and power was played by the existence of a fairly dense network of towns

The dichotomous division into Eastern and Western Europe is traditionally encountered in the historiography of the continent. This division is based on the principle of contrast—the path of development of Western Europe is supposed to have been characterized by certain qualities and properties which were absent in Eastern Europe. Conversely—Eastern Europe is supposed to have possessed qualities that were lacking in Western Europe. Let us take a closer look at one such characteristic. For example, George Schöpflin develops a dichotomous view on the evolution of the European continent. In his view, “from the earliest period onward, the West gradually evolved toward a position that powers should be divided, that the different areas of powers should be separated and the ruler should not be absolute either in his power or in his legitimation” (Schöpflin 61). Competition between the Church and State made possible for third parties to emerge. Tensions between secular and spiritual power enabled cities to flourish and gain autonomy. The merchant estate became a deciding factor in social life counterbalancing the influence of nobility. As Schöpflin points out:

In West European development a key role in the evolution of autonomous organization and power was played by the existence of a fairly dense network of towns. The West European town was a unique phenomenon in a number of ways—most significantly in its ability to develop autonomously of the ruler and the Church and to create specific political techniques intended to safeguard the basis of this autonomy, namely trade (71).

Another aspect of the Western path of development was emancipation of scientific activity from the tutelage of the Church. Freedom of speech and thought was based on the concept of autonomy of universities as they emerged in the Middle Ages. In the consequence—Schöpflin maintains—the characteristic feature of Western development was the conviction that:

The ruler was constrained to recognize that he did not exercise absolute power over his subjects, who retained politically, economically, etc. important spheres of autonomous action. Despite repeated attempts by various rulers—religious as well as secular—to extinguish or suppress these spheres of autonomy, whether in the name of order or routine or unity or rationality, they were never completely successful. Autonomy and the separation of spheres remained a crucial feature of Western patterns and subsequently became the foundation for the extension of liberties (63).

Eastern Europe took a different path of development. First of all, this part of Europe inherited the Byzantine tradition of subordination of the church by the state. In addition, cities in Eastern Europe were weaker and townspeople were not so numerous and independent. Eastern cities served as a seat of administration or as a garrison town. In contrast to Western Europe, the merchant estate was not able to counterbalance the nobility and state power. Instead, the social structure tended toward a greater concentration of power in hands of state bureaucracy (Hapsburg empire) or a dominant social class (Poland, Hungary). The civilizational backwardness of Eastern Europe fostered an intellectual dependency upon the West. As Schöpflin recognizes:

The backwardness of Eastern Europe vis-à-vis Western Europe, both real and perceived, had further ramifications . . . From the outset of the modern period, the late Enlightenment to the middle of the nineteenth century, East European elites took Western Europe as their criterion of modernity. It was immediately obvious that the task facing East European societies was to effect modernization. But the definition of this and the means to this end were not as obvious. Indeed, the East European elites tended to oversimplify the task by assuming that political and economic development to West European levels could be achieved quickly and by the practice of adopting West European political forms regardless of their local appropriateness (67-68).

In the absence of a civil society, the state took upon itself the task of modernization, a direction with further

social repercussions. The primary concern of state bureaucrats was the well-being of state machinery. Accordingly, investments were allocated in military spheres or consumed by the bureaucracy itself. Such state-stimulated modernization was distorted because it did not foster the emergence of civil society, but only strengthened bureaucratic structures. In conclusion, Schöpflin, comparing West and East Europe, ascertains:

The Western political tradition always emphasized pluralism and the fragmentation of power. In Eastern Europe, which was politically backward, the state played a much more dominant role as the principal agent of change. This resulted in a politically preeminent bureaucracy and a weak society (*ibid.*: 59).

A similarly dichotomous pattern is drawn by Peter Burke (Burke 1-2). In Burke's view, Western Europe was characterized by a greater density of population, a territory dominated by Romance and Germanic languages and by Protestant and Catholic denominations. Moreover, it was here that in the sixteenth century first elements of capitalist economy appeared. Viewed from the vantage point of this division, Eastern Europe was characterized by lower density of population and Slavic languages and Orthodox Christianity were predominant here. It is in this area that in the sixteenth century a second serfdom and manorial-serf economy based upon it developed. For his part, however, Burke finds the dichotomous division to be insufficient. An area in-between, area situated between the East and the West, between Russia and Germany, needs to be recognized in addition to the former two parts.

In a three-part division, popularized largely by Oskar Halecki, East-Central or Central Europe is distinguished in addition to Western and Eastern Europe.⁴ According to this division, Eastern Europe is supposed to be characterized by the same features as, respectively, Western Europe and Eastern Europe, but these features have different intensity, which is supposed to predetermine the particularities in the development of this region of our continent. An example of this process can be found, as Peter Burke also points out, in population density at the end of the Middle Ages. Although East Europe was clearly higher than population density Russia or Scandinavia, it was nonetheless lower than in Western Europe. In addition, Burke remarks that:

The power of the elected kings of Poland after 1572 was considerably less than that of, say, the tsar of Russia... The Renaissance made relatively little impact on Russia and the Balkans, while... Hungary, Poland and Bohemia all participated actively in that movement. A similar point could be made about Reformation.

Protestantism in various forms was a serious force in Bohemia, Poland and Hungary, while it was not in South-East Europe or in Russia (Burke 2).

This intermediate position of Central Europe is emphasized in different ways by many historians. Jenő Szücs writes that:

In all fields, structures of the Western type can be found, only slightly distorted: sometimes they are not completely developed (for example the cities), sometimes swollen out of proportion (e.g. the nobility) ... If the foundations of these structures are to be taken into consideration, many arguments appear in favor of applying the term "Central-Eastern Europe"—also during the Middle Ages—to the whole region. The term "Eastern" signifies that modifications of patterns and normative structures of the West can be found here—obviously in various forms—almost everywhere. Bohemia was more western than Hungary, Croatia rather less western, and Poland resembled Hungary in terms of economy (Szücs 66 and 68-69).

An important concept of Central Europe is also provided by the historian Piotr Wandycz (Wandycz 17-26). Wandycz lists a range of features that ensure Central Europe's distinctiveness. The relative "youth" of its civilization belongs indisputably to the basic characteristics of the region, because it was only in the tenth century that it became part of the European civilization. Distortions in its economic development were consequences of this late arrival of civilization. Initially, as Wandycz points out, the distance between both parts of Europe was gradually diminishing. Later, however, when the West evolved towards proto-industrialization at the turn of fifteenth and sixteenth century, the manorial-serf system appeared in Eastern Europe. Another characteristic of the region emerged as a result: backward social and economic structures were incongruous with the more advanced level of cultural and political development. Yet another feature of the evolution of Central Europe was a separate pattern of development of national consciousness. While in Western Europe the state created the nation, in Central Europe it was the nation understood as a social group characterized by common culture that formed the state. It was also because of this that in Central Europe a major role was played by national minorities: Germans and Jews.

A different pattern of development of national consciousness was a result of long interruptions in the development of their statehood. These interruptions accounted for the fact that the history of nations of Central Europe was filled with long struggle to recover or defend their freedom.

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Besides accepting a criterion of division of Europe according to various regions, the demarcation of borders of Central Europe causes another problem. According to Thomas Masaryk, a Czech political statesman, Central Europe is "a peculiar zone of small nations extending from the North Cape to Cape Matapan." Therefore, this area includes such nations like "Laplanners, Sweden, Norwegian and Danes, Finns, Estonian, Letts, Lithuanians, Poles, Lusatians, Czechs, and Slovaks, Magyars, Serbo-Croats and Slovenes, Romanians, Bulgars, Albanians, Turks and Greeks" (quoted after Ash 186–87).

However, contemporary historians are not so imperialistic, and therefore demarcate borders of Central Europe in more modest way. There exist two traditions of defining frontiers of Central Europe. According to the first one, Central Europe includes territories mostly inhabited by the Western and South Slavs. For example, Peter F. Sugar and Donald W. Treadgold, editors of *A History of East-Central Europe* define its borderlands in the following way:

The appropriateness of including the Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belorussians and Ukrainians was considered, and it was decided not to attempt to cover them systematically, though they appear repeatedly in these books. Treated in depth are the Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, Yugoslav peoples, Albanians, Bulgarians and Greeks (Sugar, Treadgold, 1994: vii).

In this case, historians usually modify an adjective "central" by adding one more: "east or "southern".²

The second tradition of demarcation more drastically limits the territory of Central Europe. This region was to include lands controlled by historical states of the Western Slavs and Hungarians. In accord with this tradition, Piotr Wandycz in his book on Central Europe focuses on history of Poland, Bohemia, Slovakia, and Hungary.³

Let us now turn to some of the arguments, selected from existing historiography, in favor of the postulate that societies in Central Europe differed both from West and East European societies in terms of their social structures. One can point to at least three periods in the history of our continent during which the social structures that evolved in Central Europe differed substantially from West European social structures. These were: the early period of feudalism in the tenth to twelfth centuries, the manorial-serf economy in the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries, and the period between the twentieth century world wars 1918–1939.

In societies belonging to the sphere of European civilization, feudalism emerged in three separate territorial and cultural zones (cf. Anderson and Russocki). The first zone comprised regions where feudalism was born as a result of internal evolution of ancient social conditions. In the second zone this system was a result of the synthesis of social structures of Roman civilization and of those of Germanic conquerors. Finally, in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia, which remained outside the sphere of influence of Rome and the Carolingian successor states (where private property and the system of holding land as fief emerged), feudalism came into being independently as a result of a break-up of pre-class tribal-familial communities.

In contrast to Western Europe, in Central Europe the system under which vassals held land as their lord's fief never took shape. In Central Europe, feudal land was formally the property of the sovereign. In practice, however, it was under control of the apparatus of officials. It was the baronial caste (nobiles) holding state offices which held sway over agricultural land. The power of this social class was thus built upon the command of the means of coercion and the means of production. For example, in the structure of the Polish state during the era of the Piast dynasty, one could distinguish three levels of power: central, provincial, and the level of the castellan (kasztelan). The central level comprised the court of the prince as well as specialized agencies of power such as the treasury, the military command etc. The Piast state was divided into 8 provinces and around 90 districts, each centered on its fortress (gród). The castellan headed the lowest unit of administration and possessed wide-ranging powers. Local knights were subordinated to him; he had judiciary and policing powers and was in charge of collecting tributes and taxes from the subject population. The castellan also had a separate administrative apparatus subject to him. Usually it comprised the military official (wojski), who was in charge of military affairs, the judge, who had judicial powers, the bailiff (komornik), who collected taxes and dues and finally, of the steward (włodarz), who administered private estates of the sovereign (Modzelewski [1987] 129–32).

The baronial caste also had some small estates of their own. The estates owned by members of this social group in Poland or in Hungary were rarely larger than a few villages, in exceptional cases reaching the size of ten to twenty villages. During this period, however, the power of the castellan of an average fortress district spread over more than a hundred villages. The remuneration for holding the office of castellan, that is around one third of the general value of all dues, many times

exceeded the income from his own estates (Modzelewski [1987] 143).

The peasant population was subject to the ruling class under the public (princely) law and not private law. It was because of princely law that the peasants had to provide produce and labor, which were necessary to support the state apparatus. In this period, that is tenth–twelfth centuries, a distinct social category—“ancillary people” (*ludność służebna*) separated from the peasant class. The duty of this class was to provide specialized services for the state in exchange for exemption from basic services and dues. Based on the extant names of villages around 40 different kinds of specialization were identified, out of which one third was artisan in character. The settlements inhabited by the “ancillary people” dotted the central area of the state of Piasts. Although “ancillary people” were economically privileged in comparison with the rest of rural population, their liberty was nonetheless limited. Because they passed their duties down from one generation to another, they did not have the right to move to a different place or to change their trade.

Large-scale land ownership could be created only on one principle: the prince could give up the prerogatives of public power—judicial and economic—transferring them to the landowner. The church was the first institution to make a breach in the system of princely law. From the beginning of the eleventh century, as a result of grants of immunity, the church received land together with the population settled on it. In these areas, the prince gave up the rights under the princely law with respect to the peasant population. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the granting of immunities spread to other social groups—mainly the baronial caste and the knights. In this way there appeared in Central Europe the class of feudal landlords, as was typical for West European societies. As a result of such grants of immunities, these feudal landlords took over some prerogatives of political power in its judiciary and financial aspects over the subject population.

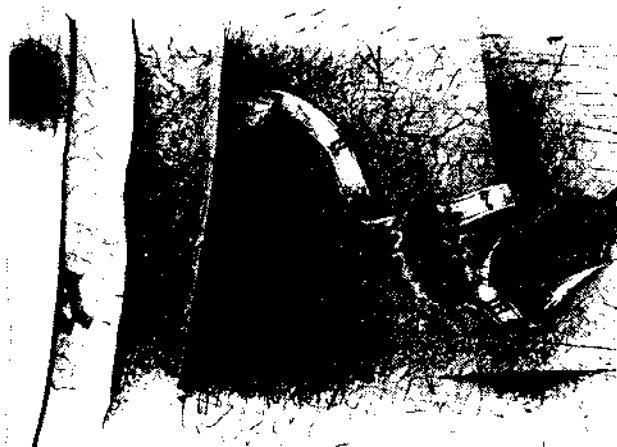
In his analysis of the system of princely law, Karol Modzelewski notes that it should be viewed from two different vantage points: that of Western European feudalism and that of the so-called Asian mode of production. What distinguishes Central European society from the patterns of Western feudalism is “the identity of the ruling class and state hierarchy,” “the indirect exploitation of the mass of population by means of the universal burden borne for the benefit of the monarchy,” and “the development of the class system without the formal infringement on the right of

common populace to land and that of other tribal institutions” (Modzelewski [1975] 266). These characteristics distinguish the system of princely law from the classic system of feudal law and seem to suggest an analogy with the so-called Asian mode of production. According to Modzelewski, however, these two systems should not be considered as identical. In the Asian mode of production, the state played the role of a coordinator and organizer of production. Land in this social system, on the other hand, was the property of particular agrarian communities, dating back to the period before the state was formed. These communities paid their tributes and provided their labor to the state. Because of this, Modzelewski sums up his analysis in the following way:

The monarchies of Eastern Europe were separated from Asian despotism by a technological gap with all its consequences for the organization of society and of its structural dynamics. The social functions of the state were limited to the areas of defense, courts, policing and the maintenance of law and order and excluded the organization of agricultural production. In the latter area, the peasant family was the basic unit of production characterized by substantial scope of independence. This was coupled with a basically individual system of taking hold of land. . . . In this respect the system of princely law and classic West-European feudalism were based on similar foundation. Being a “subject of the state” was thus a point of departure for feudalization processes, which eventually blurred the original difference between both systems’ (Modzelewski [1975] 267).

After the fall of the system of princely law in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, the societies of Western and Central Europe evolved with analogous regularities in their development: the expansion of cash economy with rents paid in cash was superseding the traditional forms of natural economy and the cities, as

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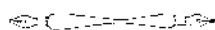
well as local and international trade, were thriving. Beginning at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, the manorial-serf economic system emerged in various countries of Central Europe, mainly in Poland, Bohemia and Hungary. Shortage of manpower was the factor triggering the divergence of development between Central Europe and Western Europe. It worked in two ways. On the one hand, a low population density coupled with the weakening of the power of the state forced the feudal landlords to improve the situation of peasants. The improvement of the economic situation in the villages—as a result of colonization based on the so-called “German law”—limited the scope of peasant migration to the cities. Consequently, the cities in Central Europe were less numerous than in Western Europe. The underdevelopment of the urban component in the united kingdoms of Central Europe disturbed the balance among the king, the burghers, and the nobility. As long as the estate of nobles was weak, the economic development of the cities and the peasantry could continue unobstructed. However, when the nobility gained political dominance in particular Central European societies, it proceeded to abolish the privileges of the burghers and the liberties of peasants. Owing to its almost complete control of the state, the estate of nobility could limit the development of the competitive urban economy and take over the prerogatives of the state towards the peasantry. Consequently, this social class, unobstructed, could introduce the so-called secondary serfdom, which made possible the increase of manorial service (further on this issue: Brzechczyn [1997 and 1998]).⁴ The expansion of the manorial-serf system, and social changes within it, were further connected with the increase of demand for agricultural produce in Western Europe.

The belated development of a capitalist economy, which appeared fully only in the second half of the nineteenth century, was a consequence of the manorial-serf system. What is more, Central European capitalism showed some structural properties distinct from its West European counterpart. In the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, most of the labor force was employed in rural areas. The belated industrialization of Central Europe had thus an impact on significantly smaller areas of its economy. Technological backwardness accounted for the fact that Central European societies could not take advantage of prosperity resulting from technological progress. A range of tensions and social conflicts ensued which were rooted in the economy. On the political level, the advances made by democratization were limited in comparison with Western European countries. The control of the

state over the economy was far more extensive than the regulation typical of a Western state.

After the First World War, parliamentary democracy and free elections were introduced in the newly independent states of Central Europe. The fate of the institutions of civil society depended on the relationship between the main social factors: property and political power. Where the traditions of despotism in political power were the strongest and the position of the private property with regard to the state apparatus was the weakest (Russia), the new political power born of the revolution took control over the economy, establishing the totalitarian system. Where the position of private ownership was the strongest (Czechoslovakia), a stable civil society was maintained. In countries situated somewhere between these two extreme cases, countries whose economy was based on agriculture or on agriculture and industry combined (Bulgaria, Estonia, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Hungary), sooner or later authoritarian political systems appeared (Tomaszewski 57–83). These political systems were established following coups carried out either with the participation or sympathetic neutrality of the army. Because political power was thus taken by politicians connected with political elites, there was no need to create mass movements of social support. The authoritarian governments maneuvered between the extremes of left and right, seeking support among various strata of society. The primary basis of power, however, remained the army and state bureaucracy (Berend 341). Increasing authoritarianism of the political system was the consequence of this takeover; depending on the country, the system of representative democracy was either limited or abolished altogether, the differences among judiciary, legislative and executive powers were blurred, while executive power itself substantially strengthened. In contrast to totalitarian systems, in authoritarian systems independent institutions of civil society were maintained, although they were limited to economic and social spheres. Authoritarian power did not try either to encroach upon the functions of religious institutions or to take over the control of the means of production (cf. Ajnenkiel, Kulesza, Ryszka, and Żarnowski). Authoritarian systems usually adopted a protectionist policy towards industry and levied high tariffs which rendered international trade almost impossible (Berend 234–45). Although the extent of control over the economy exercised by political power was smaller in authoritarian systems than the extent of control in totalitarian systems, it was still significantly larger than the extent of control of economy in a typical system of democratic capitalism.

One could thus advance a statement that in terms of their social structure, Central European societies differed throughout their history from Western European societies. This difference lay in the extent of accumulation of control over the society by the ruling class in a given period in a given society of Central Europe. Whether in the early-feudal state in the tenth-thirteenth centuries, the estate of nobles in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, or the authoritarian state in the period between the world wars, the extent of accumulation of power and thus the social power of the apparatus of officials in Central Europe was greater than the influence and power of classes ruling the Western Europe whose power was more dispersed. Use of the term "Central Europe" is justified in historiography, since this notion has not only geographic, but also social and historical meaning.⁵



¹ This historian assumed the division of Europe into Western, West-Central, Eastern, East-Central. But this division did not become widely accepted in historical literature: cf Halecki 1952: 4-5.

² Compare, for instance, title of book edited by R. R. Betts (1950) *Central and South East Europe*. According to Betts, Central Europe includes Hungary, Poland, Czech and Slovakia and South-East Europe—Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia.

³ Similar view is adopted by Antoni Mączak, Henryk Samsonowicz, and Peter Burke (1985: xi) and Stanisław Kirschbaum (1999).

⁴ It is also where (Brzechczyn [1998] 13-43, 262-268) the discussion of the most important concepts and a bibliography of economic dualism in the history of sixteenth century Europe can be found.

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