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Martin Müller's "Global East":
The Next Episode in Central Europe's
Failed Quest to Be Something
Other than it Is

Central Europeans have very rich language for describing their own countries in unflattering manner and very, very long tradition of doing so. In this article author proposes a hypothesis for unusually low collective self-esteem. It is deeply rooted in the region's peripheral relation with the West. It is a by-product of a yawning gap between rich, powerful, industrialized West and stagnant Central Europe. Müller's "Global East" is, from this perspective, one of the (many) attempts to overcome region's peripheral status.

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This shows the difficulty of the task that Müller attempted — to establish the “Global East” as a geographical and political concept, to rival the “Global South”. Brazil is fun, Kenya is exotic, India is spectacular: Central and Eastern Europe is just dull and grey. A lot of people — including many Central Europeans — think so.

“Grey place”. This was the first and foremost impression of Martin Müller’s students about ex-Soviet countries. They perceived Central Europe as “terra incognita of the world, where Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Molvania blend into an amorphous mass”. This shows the difficulty of the task that Müller attempted — to establish the “Global East” as a geographical and political concept, to rival the “Global South”. Brazil is fun, Kenya is exotic, India is spectacular: Central and Eastern Europe is just dull and grey. A lot of people — including many Central Europeans — think so. The Polish writer Ziemowit Szczerek, who wrote a number of books about self-perception of Poles and other Eastern and Central Europeans, noted that there are innumerable words and expressions in their languages used to disparage their homelands (which they declare to love, by the way). For example, Croats use the word *vukojebina* (literally “the place where wolves fuck”), which is a rough equivalent of the Polish *zadupie* (“the place behind or below the arse”) (Szczerek 2018). *Finis terrae, anus mundi*, the place where the “dogs bark with their asses” — Central Europeans have very rich language for describing their own countries in an unflattering manner and very, very long tradition of doing so.

Of course there is also a hierarchy among the damned. We have better and worse places, even in our beloved Central Europe. In one of the Szczerek’s novels–reportages (the relationship between facts and author’s imagination is never completely clear in his works) he quotes a young Ukrainian woman:

Why do you come here, you Poles [...] You come here because in other countries they laugh at you. And they think of you the same way as you think about us: as a backward shit-hole you can sneer at. And feel superior towards. [...] Because everyone thinks you’re impoverished, Eastern trash. [...] Not just the Germans, but also the Czechs, even the Slovaks and the Hungarians. You only think the Hungarians are such fucking awesome pals of yours. But in fact they make fun of you just like everyone else. Not to mention the Serbs and the Croats. Even the Lithuanians, pal. Everyone thinks you’re just a slightly different version of Russia. The third world. It’s only here that you can be patronizing. Here you make up for the fact that everywhere else they wipe their asses with you (Kalin 2018).

A few years ago I wrote a book about the Polish collective self-image — based on hundreds of literary works, journalistic articles, and private letters (Leszczyński 2016). I concluded that the negative self-image of Poles has been surprisingly constant since at least the late 18th century

and was fully formed by the middle of the 19th century. It has not evolved since. The rightists and the leftists; conservatives and modernizers; men and women; all of them, despite many differences, had very similar list of perceived Polish moral faults and social defects. Let's list them: a low level of personal hygiene; bad roads; ugly and chaotic cities; low level of education among the citizenry; elites that are poorly educated, intellectually shallow and uncurious; uncivil and unpleasant social life; a public administration which is unfriendly to citizens; and overall poverty and hopelessness. The high achievements of science and civilization are not to be found here, in Poland — they all come from the West. In the words of one of the most famous Polish writers, Bolesław Prus (1847–1912), Poland does not contribute anything to the treasury of human civilization. We are freeriders; we just take inventions and ideas produced elsewhere (that is — in the West). We, Poles, only try to implement them here, in our land, and we do it usually poorly. Prus repeated this accusation many times during the 40-plus years of his journalistic career.

What lies beneath this unusually low self-esteem? What are the reasons for it? Polish nobles in the early modern age — before the Enlightenment — had a rather good, if not excellent, opinion about themselves and their sociopolitical system. My theory is that the real reason for this decline in self-perception was the discovery of growing gap between the rich, powerful, industrializing West and stagnant Central Europe. In the terms of Immanuel Wallerstein, Polish lands were the first semi-periphery to the West – the center of the world system. We were close and similar to the West, but at the same time also distant, poorer, weaker, infinitely less important in the magnificent game of geopolitics. The Polish elites were aware of this in the 1750s. The mass exodus of poor peasants from Polish territories to the West, which started in the 1870s, brought ample possibilities to compare the quality of life between the “old” country and “new” one. The results were disastrous for the collective self-image.

When one reads the letters and memoirs left to us by Polish immigrants — many of them have been published — it is hard not to notice the deep feelings of alienation and contempt for the homeland. Let's discuss one — but representative — example here. In 1929, an emigre visited Poland after many years spent in the USA. He published his impressions from his old village (near Rzeszów) in the periodical “Ziemia Rzeszowska”. Let's quote:

Self-image of Poles has been surprisingly constant since at least the late 18th century and was fully formed by the middle of the 19th century. It has not evolved since.

After arriving in the village, I experienced various contradictory feelings. I was offended by the old customs of our people, I was stunned by the barefoot, dirty, sunburned legs of girls, elderly women, children and men, legs red like baked crayfish. It looks so archaic to me now, so reminiscent of slavery, just so poor and unsightly that it really felt offensive. Not everyone walks like this out of necessity, for lack of shoes, but simply out of habit. However, the emigrants, those who returned to Poland from the world, they do not live like this anymore (Duda-Dziewierz 1938, 141-142).

In the author's eyes there was an opposition between Poland and the "world", where he now lived and where life was better. The peasant women, he wrote, looked like "our [American] Indians". The smells of his village were a mixture of "heavenly aromas" of fields and meadows with a terrible stench of unwashed human bodies. The visitor noted:

In Western countries, especially in America, bathing has become an almost daily necessity in every season of the year, and here they don't bathe in the villages for years, and some people don't know what bath is! (...) The people use the same spaces for barns and pigsties and human dwellings (...) This makes the proverbial fresh air in the countryside an extremely stupid joke, paradox or irony, because while the fields smell like divine aromas (...), the nasty killing stench of stables and henhouses and pigsties in country huts makes you sick (...). Imagine what it feels like in summer, when billions of flies hatch, when all of them fly to the dung, and then swarms into open doors, windows and apartments, sit on food, draw in pots and milk (Duda-Dziewierz 1938, 141-142).

It would be very easy to fill not just a book, but a library with the records of such experiences.

This is the local perspective on "Global East". From the Western perspective, Müller's "Global East" — meaning Central and Eastern Europe — was also a no-place, an empty space between Germany and the three Oriental capitals: St. Petersburg, Moscow and Constantinople. Let's quote one such description from a Western traveler. In 1784 the British explorer William Coxe published, in London, a well-received description of his travels to Poland, Denmark, Sweden and Russia. He described Poland as a fallen, once-great nation, but at the same time uncivilized and primitive.

The nation has few manufactures, scarcely any commerce; a king almost without any authority; the nobles in the state of uncontrolled anarchy; the peasants groaning under a yoke of feudal despotism far worse than the tyranny of an absolute monarch. I never before observed such an inequality of fortune, such

sudden transition from extreme riches to extreme poverty; wherever I turned my eyes, luxury and wretchedness were constant neighbours. (...) The peasants in Poland, as in all feudal governments, are serfs or slaves; and the value of an estate is not estimated so much from its extent, as from the number of its peasants, who are transferred from one master to another like so many head of cattle (Coxe 1784, 122, 129).

While local elites wanted to compare their capitals to Paris — for example, both Warsaw and Bucharest liked to call themselves the “Paris of the East” — foreign visitors saw no Paris, but something more similar to a dirty eastern bazaar. The Polish historian Błażej Brzostek wrote an excellent book (2015) about both local aspirations and the experiences of Western travelers. It is a very worthwhile read — even if rather sad.

In 1994, the American historian Larry Wolff (1994) subjected the Western experience of Central and Eastern Europe to a thorough deconstruction (Coxe, quoted earlier, was one of his heroes). In their description of our land, it is impossible to distinguish projection from observation — so Wolff argued. In the 18th century, the Western European Enlightenment projected Eastern Europe — a vast area stretching between Berlin and Vienna in the west, and St. Petersburg and Istanbul in the east — as its opposite, as the antithesis of Western “civilization” (this word held a special place in the vocabulary of the Enlightenment). Bad roads; poor and oppressed peasants, living in conditions close to those of animals; dirty inns; sophisticated elites living in palaces among general poverty; widespread violence and brutality mixed with elements of dress and manners brought from the West — these were the common elements of these descriptions, regardless of whether they related to Wallachia, the lands of the Commonwealth or Hungary. In this picture, Eastern Europe played the roles of the distant periphery of the West and its oriental mirror. It was the “place between” the proper Orient, that is Russia and Turkey, and the actual West, whose border ended in Germany and Austria.

This image of Eastern Europe, Wolff added, was a great political tool for the predatory empires — Prussia, Austria and Russia — which, in the name of “civilization”, colonized this territory. Comparisons of the inhabitants of the Commonwealth to peoples from distant non-European lands were an open invitation to conquest. “A country as virgin as Canada” — Jean-Emmanuel Gilbert (1741–1814), a French naturalist whom Coxe met during his stay in Grodno, wrote about Lithuania.

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rian’s narrative) was shaped by the time it was written, its hopes and fears. Wolff’s message — namely that the image of Eastern Europe as a region of wildness, oppression and darkness is a projection of the West in which its imperial needs were expressed — was associated with hopes for the return of the countries between the Elbe and the Dnieper to the true European family (they had never belonged to this family before, but this did not matter to Wolff). The Soviet Empire fell; the dawn of civilization was coming to Central Europe again. Although Wolff does not question the literal truth of the quoted Westerners, he suggests that their perception of Central and Eastern Europe was flawed: the structure of their narrative (and, therefore, its conclusion) was imposed on what they saw. The sad perception of Central and Eastern Europe was an ideological construct; the place deserved a better reputation. In the 1990s it seemed far-fetched, but possible.

Let’s now return to Müller’s idea of the “Global East”. It is very difficult to change the “mental map” (in Wolff’s words) of both the local people and Western elites. Also, it may not be worth trying, especially when the “Global East” nowadays seems to be the place of rising authoritarianism and intolerance, a social space wholly different from liberal Western societies. In 2018, the American economist and influential political commentator Paul Krugman summarized the disappointment of the Western elites with Central and Eastern Europe in an anecdote which is worth quoting.

When the Berlin Wall fell, a political scientist I know joked, ‘Now that Eastern Europe is free from the alien ideology of Communism, it can return to its true path: fascism.’ We both knew he had a point (Krugman 2018).

Changing this perception is going to be difficult and I am not sure it is really worthwhile at present. The “Global East”, meaning Central and Eastern Europe, is still grey, still poor, and still authoritarian (the roads have improved though, thanks to the European Union). Does this make the “Global East” a special place, worthy of its own distinction between North and South? I am not sure. It may only make the difference between us and the West even more pronounced.

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Tytuł: „Globalny Wschód” Martina Müllera: Kolejna z wielu nieudanych prób podejmowanych przez Europę Środkową, która chciałyby być czymś innym niż jest

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Słowa kluczowe: Globalny Wschód, Europa Środkowa, Zachód, zbiorowa samoocena, półperyferia