

**Balázs Trencsényi and Michal Kopeček (eds):
Discourses of collective identity in Central and
Southeast Europe. Vol. I: Late Enlightenment—
Emergence of the Modern ‘National Idea.’ Vol. II:
National Romanticism—the Formation of National
Movements**

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The 2005 failure of a European ‘Constitution’, one might say, served as a catalyst for academics and public intellectuals dealing with European history. The issues ‘what is it to be European?’, ‘where are the borders of Europe?’, and ‘how can one speak of a common history and culture in such a diverse region?’ were raised again, and considerable efforts have already been made for building a common European historical framework. However, such an endeavor requires a serious revision of long established methods of historiography: the current lively dialogue between comparative, and entangled or transnational history is closely linked to this process of rethinking European history. Further, there are more and more intellectual and historiographical forums that address the necessity of including also the historical experiences of Eastern Europe in this planned common framework, and not only as illustration or as some exotic curiosity, but in a way that challenges the long-standing Western European narratives which also largely defined the terms of East Central and Southeastern European self-articulations (both national and regional) throughout the twentieth century and before. In a way, these splendid new readers created by a group of cutting edge Central and Southeastern European young scholars contribute to these political and ideological debates in a profound manner as well, even though this was probably not among their original intentions when they started their project in 1999.

The first two of the planned four volumes collect texts of various genres that address, directly or indirectly, key questions of the ‘nation’, exploring how the ‘national idea’ was communicated, represented and negotiated. A great achievement of the volume lies in its structure: instead of dividing the reader into ‘national’ chapters, which risks the reproduction of the usual national narratives, the editors

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arranged the texts around some crucial issues, such as the transformation of symbolic geography, the creation of an enlightened national public, the nationalization of space, national heroism, and so forth. The primary texts, the majority of which were not available in English before, are either key documents in the respective national canons, or failed attempts of reshaping mainstream identity politics, but which have their canonized counterparts in other national projects. These are complemented by an informative note on the given author, and by contextualizing mini-essays that, apart from discussing key issues and asking what the author was doing by writing and publishing the text, aim at translating and explaining the crucial concepts of various national discourses. Thereby, the Identity Reader, as the editors call it, is one of the most serious attempts yet to track conceptual transformations in a multiplicity of contexts. According to the editors, accomplishing this task might lead to the creation of “more encompassing frameworks for studying the varieties of national narratives” (I, 1).

This latter sensitivity to intertextual relations leads us to another closely related key question of the project that deserves emphasis: the Reader challenges the customary terms of periodization. A contribution by one of the leading Hungarian historians of the Early Modern period, László Kontler’s ‘guest essay’ to the first volume on the Enlightenment in Central Europe, serves as an excellent introduction to the whole series, in so far as it offers a well-argued case of how this term of periodization cannot be adequate for pan-European use without further qualifications. As Kontler suggests, “the Enlightenment in Central and Eastern Europe was approached as synonymous with the reception of *philosophes* and the achievement of figures who could be mustered up as local counterparts, and of course the degree of penetration was not found convincing enough” (I, 34). He considers such an East–West oriented approach outdated. Arguing that the Enlightenment is, at best, a rather complex phenomenon that could be identified only by the questions it asked, Kontler proposes to borrow John Pocock’s ideas on multiple “enlightenments” and to apply it creatively to Eastern and Central Europe. Kontler’s proposal, in my opinion, should be welcomed by historians of the region; however, one might note that Pocock also invented his theory based on Western materials.

While Kontler, whose approach seems to be very close to that of the editors, persuasively refutes the widely circulated stereotypes of Enlightenment (such as being an age of ‘cool reason’), Paschalis Kitromilides, who contributes another guest essay on Enlightenment (this time in Southeast Europe), tends to reproduce them. Somewhat in contrast to the general framework of the whole project, he abides by a fixed “canon of Enlightenment ideas” (I, 46). Clearly, his work, being a major source of inspiration for dozens of qualified young historians, is rather complex, but Kitromilides’ point of view in this particular essay reads as determined by the age-old struggle on the side of Eastern and Southeastern European intellectuals to persuade their Western partners that their nation and culture also belong to ‘Europe’, an ideal essentialized on the basis of Western European cultures: “neither Balkan society,” he asserts, “nor the Enlightenment in the region should be understood as incoherent, as lacking a certain cohesion determined by shared features.” (I, 47)

Miroslav Hroch's introductory study at the beginning of the second volume, informed by a Marxist and highly normative approach, seems even more displaced in the given context. It is telling that at the book launch of the first volume (held at the Central European University on November 10, 2006, in the course of an international colloquium on 'Comparative History in/on Europe'), the distinguished Czech scholar asked one of the initiators of the project, the Bulgarian historian, Diana Mishkova, about the similarities they found in the region's national traditions. The question in itself reveals the distance of perspectives: while Hroch was, naturally, interested in structural parallelisms and the possibilities of constructing a more or less homogenous region, this does not entirely correspond to Mishkova's and her colleagues' vision. Their ambition is not to create a supra-national narrative, but rather to expose a wide variety of national traditions with their competing and often mutually exclusive intellectual offers, while also looking at certain sub-national, and regional alternatives. Indeed, the national canons often "devised their own identity-discourse in mimetic competition with their neighbors" (I, 22). Of course, the endeavor to understand the particularities of local/national cultures requires a much more nuanced discourse analysis than Hroch would wish to subscribe to, even though his inspiration is tangible in the Reader's practice of revisiting "conceptions of national uniqueness" by pointing out discursive-structural similarities, among others (I, 15).

It was a nice gesture on the side of the editors of the whole project, Ahmet Ersoy, Maciej Górný, Vangelis Kechriotis, Michal Kopeček, Boyan Manchev, Balázs Trencsényi, and Marius Turda that they asked authoritative scholars (as far as I know, their own professors) with works of great importance, such as Kitromilides and Hroch, to contribute to their volumes. It is notable that the latter accepted the invitation, even though it is becoming clear that their younger colleagues follow a different path. It still seems evident that a new generation of highly versed scholars of East Central and Southeast Europe has emerged with an apparently divergent agenda confronting both the self-enclosed national narratives and an ideal-typical 'Western perspective', often internalized in the region. This Identity Reader is probably the first significant collective scholarly achievement of this new generation of scholars, and as such it deserves particular attention.