

**UNIVERSITATEA „BABEȘ-BOLYAI” OF CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF „COMMUNICATION AND
CULTURE”**

A közép-európaiság egzisztenciális és kulturális dimenziói
Existential and cultural dimensions of the Central European condition

PhD thesis summary

Scientific advisor:
Prof. univ. dr. VERESS Carol

Candidate:
SZŐCS Krisztina

Cluj Napoca
2011

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Keywords: Central-European condition, central, Europe, hermeneutical problem, hermeneutical experience, historical experience, tradition, identity, culture, dialogue, otherness, differences, belongingness, postmodern, rhizome, fragmentation, eventuality, plurality, eclecticism.

1.) The goal of the dissertation and the limitations of the topic

The topic of my dissertation is the philosophical analysis of the Central European condition as hermeneutical, historical, and identity-experience that can facilitate the interpretation of cultural and existential dimensions of the Central European condition. Therefore the primary goal is to inquire and interpret philosophically the existential and cultural horizons of the Central-European condition. It is not its goal to chart the geographical, economical, political relevance of Central Europe, nor do I want to discuss its history, because these have all been tackled in the regional polemics in there complexity, difficulty. The many issues, as well as their importance exceed the dimensions of the present work. I started with the realization that the above mentioned complexities would not allow this paper to set as goal the geographical, political, cultural-historical approach. Instead I will focus on the analysis of the philosophical aspects of Central Europe that showcase its changing identities and character, revealing and interpreting itself with the help of its specific world of experiences. This is why the paper will try to present the process of the history of philosophy and ideas where Central Europe appeared, has shaped itself and could communicate the specific forms of regional belongings. In the following, starting from the concept of Central Europe, an emphasis is put on the dimensions of the manifestation of life and world experiences people have. The philosophical analysis of the cultural and existential dimension of the Central-European condition has three levels.

Firstly because the only method one could examine the conceptuality of the Central European condition is by referencing to the geographical, historical, political, cultural-historical approaches. I considered essential the analyses of the processes of the history of philosophy and of ideas in which Central Europe differentiates itself from western and eastern patterns, incorporating its own stylistic unit as a form of consciousness that has

shaped itself and its own sense of identity. On another, more basic level the key issue of this research has been the goal to connect the elements of the Central European construction, the in-between character, tradition, otherness, communication, belonging, and cultural differences in a hermeneutical paradigm. My supposition is that the hermeneutical approach will provide a more compelling interpretational field for the synthesis of the Central European condition as a world of experience in the middle of Europe that I describe, understand and interpret. On the third level the main purpose was to prove that the Central European experience and the interpretation of identity structured around nation, ethnicity, national culture, and history – because of a multicultural background – cannot be restricted to one sole category of interpretation. The fundamentals of philosophical-hermeneutical thinking in analyzing the problem of Central Europe that of being-in-the-middle focused on understanding the dialects of similarities and differences. The simultaneous presence of differences and similarities has led to the conclusion that the Central European condition won't become accessible via a ready-made interpretation, but through diverse, multi-leveled structures of sense-making, that will always be on route to create its contradictory forms of contingency and fragmentation. Next to the insight into the systematic structures of a reconstruction based on the history of ideas, the Central European condition will attempt to open a possibility of interpretation. Hereby the analyses of Central Europe will not come to an end through approaches that exclude or replace each other but it will incorporate several aspects of a unitary phenomenon, so the reality of the central space in its dynamic movements of complexity, fragmentation and tensions of its antinomies will become subject to description. The analyses, apart from content reconstruction and problems will be completed by a methodological perspective that attempts to interpret and explore the Central European condition as a hermeneutical experience. Thus the paper besides interpreting the dimension of the history of ideas and philosophy and cultural aspects, will adopt a basic level – where simultaneously with but inseparably from the Central-European conception – it will connect the experience of the Central European condition with hermeneutic thinking.

The key concept of this paper, *experience*, is directed towards the Central European background as a private world, where the everydayness of lived and interpreted life will

transform into a world of experience. The individual-world in this sense is the world lived every day without coming to a closed event but indeed a world in a flowing process and development. The topic of this paper starts from the supposition that the sense of belonging to a community and its patterns will define the character of the being-in the-world, limit our concepts, questions and the direction that our identities will follow. Living in Central Europe induces a state of experience, being Central European we find ourselves in an all-encompassing space that builds a kind of horizon for us, limits the infinite movement of experiencing, and opens the dimensions of possibilities and interpretations arising in “private existence” itself. The exploration of private existence is fundamental in this sense as Central Europeans, Hungarians, Czechs, Polish etc. we can only have an authentic access to a world that reveals itself in its everydayness. The intentions of the individuals sharing this Central European space will be oriented to being-at-home and the experience of Central-Europe itself.

The above thoughts have led to the following hypothesis: the Central European condition will manifest as a background of experience that nourishes from the elements of common tradition and history, building its horizon of understanding based on a sense of culture and the individuals of this region frame their continually reinterpreted identities, in acknowledgment or in conflicting state. The identity of Central Europe is represented and interpreted though mostly based on memory, narratives, articles, cultural institutions, and essays that have different value. The communicational contrasts of space, the presence of languages, the variety of interpretations, leads to a multi-lingual and complex Central European concept. The variety of meanings in the analysis of Central Europe, the complexity and many senses that has, needs a framework that is not keen on summing up, but – due to the essential openness and complexity – will reinterpret and question over again the issue of this central space.

2.) The applied methods and the structure of the dissertation

I have preferred in this present research the use of a theoretical and self-reflexive questioning, with philosophical methods like understanding, re-understanding. This makes the profile of my research as an applied philosophy. The methodological

framework is following on the methodological presuppositions and perspectives of hermeneutics. Next to the hermeneutical perspective the topic of the research contains some themes of philosophy of culture (culture, collective identity) and ontology (being-in-between, limitedness, conscience of being-different). These connections have also reminiscences of geopolitical and historical perspectives that have contributed in making the Central European mind in the modern sense. Since the issue of Central Europe has concerned political science, historians, sociologist, critics of culture, this paper will inevitably have an interdisciplinary approach. The dissertation will address the above mentioned themes in five chapters.

First chapter: The Central-European condition as a philosophical problem

The first subchapter (1.1) will start off with inquiring on the difference of Central-Europe and the Central European condition. I considered important to show that while Central Europe refers to a region in the middle of Europe then the concept of the Central European condition has a deeper sense. On making this comparison I came to the conclusion that the Central European condition serves as a concept to showcase the experiences, the worlds, mentalities, and feelings in this space. The subchapter (1.4) entitled the *Development of the concept of Central-Europe* based on the concept of Central European condition will analyze briefly the processes of the history of ideas and of culture, that initiated a specific identity-construction of Central-Europe as it differentiates itself from other parts of Europe. After a brief revisiting of the concept of Central Europe and its reconstruction in the history of ideas I have proceeded on working on the question of Central European philosophy.

The chapter (1.5) *Philosophy in Central-Europe* will explore the philosophical thought of Central-Europe focusing on the schools that appeared at the turn of the nineteenth century (Vienna Circle, The Warsaw Logics School) describing these schools on the base of a common stylistic unit. Following the analysis I came to the conclusion that the thought of Central Europe does not primarily form the discipline called “Central European philosophy”, some doubt even the existence of Central European philosophy. On comparing the philosophies at the turn of the century – especially the Austrian and the Polish ones, – I found common elements (logical analysis, conceptual accuracy, linguistic

precision) that had their origins in the common, political, cultural, historical background of this region. If we take this fact into account then the doubt on the existence of a Central European philosophy can be dismissed. But if we would wish to identify common Central European directions, which belong to the whole region, or a common philosophical mentality, we have to expect that the so called Central European philosophy will have some aspects that cannot be grouped in a common Central European horizon.

The subchapter “What is Central-Europe?” (1.6) searches for possibility to approach philosophically the problem of the “central space”. In the mentioned sub-chapters the question on the Central European condition re-occurs as a subject of debate and inquiry as a concept in need of continuous interpretation. This section (1.6) argues from the direction of conceptual articulation, on questionability and interpretability of the Central European condition, while keeping in mind the new senses of tradition, the limitation imposed by horizons and those of the acts of experiencing. It posits the problem of the Central European condition as a hermeneutical problem. The suppositions at the end of the chapter show the conceptual framework where the problems to come further on will be revealed and can be interpreted. The question regarding Central Europe will maintain a debate that will inevitably spawn questions that are to be articulated in a given hermeneutical situation. Thus this chapter ends with the conclusion that the Central European condition may be best approached as a relevant philosophical problem within the categories of hermeneutics.

Second chapter: The Central European condition as hermeneutical problem

The second chapter of my dissertation aims to reflect on life-situations in everyday experience where the processes and the structures of the Central European condition appear and become problematic. *The Central-European condition as hermeneutical problem* focuses on the analysis and development of two main chapters: the Central European condition as a hermeneutical and as a historical experience. In this chapter I begin with the presumption that the analysis of the Central European condition in daily life requires both a universal and a particular attitude that exceeds the objective factual method of the natural sciences. That is why the analysis of the experience of the Central

European condition adopts a philosophical perspective that through its compelling and universal quality could merge in the most varied forms of human experience and existential meanings. This attitude is made possible by hermeneutics, an attitude both known for its interest in approaching questions on universality and particularity. The concept of experience as known in hermeneutics will connect the apparently separate parts. Through its presence everywhere and its penetration into all lived experiences, one is “forced” to adopt the hermeneutical perspective, so the world can be accessible and interpretable. *The Central European condition as hermeneutical experience* (2.1) will engage in confirming the hypothesis that the generated experience and living originates from the background of the Central European condition and composes even in this moment our ongoing experiential world. Central Europe in this sense is the world that surrounds and predates all our experiences and acts of our experience. The subchapters within the main chapter have performed a conceptual analysis that helped me in better accessing the insights of the Central European condition.

The first part (2.1) that begins with the concept of experience will lead us to the actual problem via a hermeneutical and a cognitive analysis: the experience of the Central European condition inquires on the role of experience in our life-worlds. The second part (2.2) discusses *The Central European condition as historical experience* and is focused on the horizon of the past appearing in the present, that shape our experiences of the Central European condition and articulates the Central European tradition that defines us. The person who wants to understand her present will only gain authentic knowledge, if she opens up to the horizons of the past: the understanding and interpretation of tradition and history. Indicative of the Central European self-interpreting forms are: the standing-in-tradition, the orientation towards the past and as an effect of the all-analyzing attitude historic sense of nostalgia lingers eventually defining the development of the Central European idealities. That is why the rhetorical historicity defines well the Central European intelligentsia. I analyzed the latter situation taking into account the nostalgia-sense of the past, with the specificity of the regions mixed traditions, mutuality, complementary state in a hermeneutical movement of the past oriented to present and the present oriented to the past. Eventually this served as a base for the research.

Chapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.3 start from the presumption that the structures of the past,

the tradition affecting us has great importance in interpreting the present, understanding and getting to know ourselves. Thus being rooted in the Central European tradition as a being-on-the-way in a historically well defined experience helps us in better understanding ourselves and our culture.

Chapter three: The Central European condition as experience of identity

I analyze the Central-European condition as a definitional identity-rendering experience in the third part. This part is based on the presumption that the world of experience we all act in within our daily life has an effect on the development of our identity, or as one may say, our gained experiences shape our identities. Also beyond the spoilers of political and national-political boundaries of cultural identity the Central European condition spreads its ideas towards a cultural dimension that together with competing structures and forms will manifest in a communicational space. The Central European zone meaning here a communicational space, also creates the conditions for some forms and structures to develop and has an interaction-gravitation that allows not only understanding but intolerance and the rejection of the other. The antinomy structures that reign in Central Europe, the differences and alterity raise the question of whether the differences of separate qualities can be transcended, would we be able to bridge the culturally created abyss? Or if the dialogue of the *same* and the *other* can ever be possible?

Upon discussing the Central European identity I came to three conclusions. 1) Contrary to the discourses of unity, the identity of Central Europe is colorful and complex, hence her own definition of identity cannot be grasped restricted to one interpretational dimension. The cultural identity of Central Europe is only structured through the act of understanding otherwise she is fragmented and is articulated by the ceaseless perception and experience of the re-interpreted collective identity. 2) According to the second conclusion the Central European identity is a product of narrative identity-building or preservation is only validated by contrasting the “us” and “them”. Drawing a line between “us” and “them” will inevitably lead to conflict as the deepening the differences grow. The third chapter (3.5.3) will end with an attempt to bridge the distances and communicational problems coming from differences and it is based on the

assumption that Central Europe will only stand a chance to handle the tensions generated by her diversity if her ideality will not focus on destroying these differences, but will orient herself instead towards understanding otherness and will harbor the openness for difference. This change of perspective can only originate from her and includes openness of directions, admitting the otherness of the other, getting to know and understanding. Ones affirmation is possible by way of affirming the “other’s” world of experience. To make this cultural dialogue possible I suggested the studying of a hermeneutical basic-situation that leads to the understanding of the self, by making lucrative the possibility of dialogue and with putting the emphasis on eliminating ones own prejudices. The question coming from Central-Europe’s conflict driven dynamic processes aims to achieve a dialogue that can only occur in a hermeneutical situation of the in-between, dissolving the conflict in the actual encounter of “I” and the “other”. This hermeneutical situation gives a chance to both “I” and the “Other” to accept and interact as seen in Homi Bhaba’s process of translation and dealing in a common space.

Forth chapter: The Central European condition and the postmodernism

In the forth chapter I analyze the concentric circles of the Central European condition and their continuous movement from a postmodern perspective in maintaining, strengthening and understanding differences and eliminating them. In this chapter I start from the presumption that the Central European systematic construct of pluralism, contingency and fragmentation generates very similar structures to the postmodern conception of accepting diversity. The first subchapter *The concept of the postmodern* (4.1) is discussing the development of postmodern ideas and the concepts on postmodernism. In the following subchapter (4.2 – 4.4) I am looking at how the diversity of concepts in the Central European condition can be affiliated with some postmodern structures. How can one conceptualize the evading, diverse construct of the Central European condition and what are the patterns given to assess its conceptual framework? This chapter challenges the perspective of the Central European condition as a unity and puts it in another perspective. Here the reality of different worlds (nations, cultures, subcultures) exists and forms a unity together with many worlds through the Central European condition. Central Europe perceived as a unity only bares its unity in its name,

because the Central-European world of experience is in reality filled with contradictions, worlds of separate experiences intersecting. Upon analyzing the Central European forms I came to the conclusion that the Central European dimension in its seeming unity, resembles the diversity of rizomas and there pluralistic, all-merging world. Its main idea is characterized by competing opinions, views, a variety of values, fragmentation, contingency, numerous definitions and the maze and a conceptual blur. This leads to the conclusion according to which the Central European condition generates structures similar to the postmodern. I analyzed the concept of postmodernism and its diverse developments and then I compared these to the elements of the Central European condition. In order to access this circular spreading movement in the chapter entitled *The rhizomatical side of the Central European condition* I drew on the rizomatic perspective of Deleuze and Guattari. The rizoma is denying the linear perspectives and showcases that very much pluralistic, conceptual blur that we are concerned with in the case of the Central European condition. The rizoma considered a consequence of postmodernism has a similar circle-like, elliptic structure similar to the Central European condition. The eclecticism of rizomas proves that there is not one monolithic Central Europe but many Central Europe's. In the chapter entitled *The awakening self-consciousness of the Central-European condition* I only reiterate the supposition that the Central European condition and postmodernism have similar structures. In this chapter I concluded that the Central European consciousness in the wake of a massive literature on Central-European condition needed to acknowledge the fact of its constitutive self-consciousness leading to interpretations that often contradict each other and rival. This will lead us to think that there is not merely a constitutive self-consciousness of a unity but many realities, narratives and bundling postmodern chaos in the end. The chaos, the transitory state of interpretations, means that Central-Europe is not a monolithic unity, but a reality in the midst of Europe, that if interpreted, postmodern reality comes to mind. To represent this diversity the cultural dimension is useful, since the variety of Central European conditions is best represented by art and literature. The Central-European condition can take the shape of a biedermeier, rotunda, a novel of Hrabal, a short story of Kundera, stories on the OMM, postcommunism or even postcolonialism (4.5.). These all mean a specific view on the concepts and the aspects of Central Europe.

Chapter five: The cultural diversity of Central Europe

In the fifth chapter I tried to portray this fragmented, chaotic cultural diversity through the arts of *biedermeier*, Kafka, Kundera, Hrabal. The two subchapters (5.1–5.2.) that are part of chapter five are used to discuss the disappearing, reappearing qualities of the Central European condition. In this chapter I shortly mention the eclecticism and the literary fragmentation of Central Europe. This part aims to be only a short sketch of the Central-European condition. Under these conditions the dissertation has focused on the cultural and philosophical elements and there analyses, thus I cannot present all the perspectives, dimensions, genres in detail. The goal is more to observe some of the aspects that reveal themselves in the understanding and interpreting within the horizon of experiences of individuals. In this region one can observe a mixture of literary and artistic genres that lead to the strengthening of pronounced postmodern elements such as the fragmented reality and eclecticism. This leads to a cavalcade of a postmodern kind in the Central European condition. The dimensional features of Central Europe include: the eclectic art of Central-Europe, short stories, the cultural importance of the Jews in this region, the *Biedermeier*, baroque, the German influences, Czech short stories, Hungarian prose or Bartok's art.

3.) Conclusions

Following the above seen reflections one can come the next conclusions. 1) As our experience is taking shape in Central European situation, living in Central Europe induces a situation in perceiving that whether widened or tightened, will define the nascent experiences and will always already influence our acts. Belonging to a community, to its conscience, its patterns influences the quality of being-in-the-world limits our concepts, our questions and identity-making. 2) The Central-European condition can be seen as a unity where common art, tradition, cultural conscience will have its character. The belonging to the community sets the boundaries with others and helps identity consolidate by being different from others and base collective identity on own narratives. The Central European ideality is a blurry conscience full of

contradictions and hard to define to the point of terminological maze.

3) The concept of Central European condition that I applied to hermeneutics in a philosophical dimension, allows the openness of many horizons of sense, in a transitory state. I came to the conclusion that the way out of the terminological maze, is the recognition the Central European condition is not a collective consciousness based on a monolith structure, but a pluralist environment encompassing many worlds and contradictory views that can be grasped in the fragmented world of clashing and separating structures. The structures that connect give the impression that there is but one unitary Central European condition, yet there are many present simultaneously. As a final conclusion we can say that the numerous worlds that match or collide anticipate the multiplicity of interactions between “you” and “others”. The interaction of worlds will often have experiences that cross and define each other and contribute to the competing interpretations that always go on. The definition of Central European ideality won't be summed up but will go along and be reinterpreted and transform with us. Thanks to the various interpretative dimensions, researching the Central European condition will open many new possibilities of interpretation.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to all who have supported and encouraged me to write this thesis. I thank my doctoral supervisor, prof. univ. dr. Veress Carol for his scientific guidance during my work.

This work was financed from the following project: Ph.D. scholarship, Project co-financed by the Sectoral Operational Program For Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013. Contract nr.: POSDRU 6/1.5/S/4 – “Doctoral studies, a major factor in the development of socio-economic and humanistic studies”.

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