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A “Laboratory of Twilight” Versus a “Pub in Bořivojova Street”: Demystifying the Czech Myth and Decentring Central Europe in Emil Hakl’s *Of Kids and Parents (O rodičích a dětech)*

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Abstract

The history of physical and socio-political violence in Central Europe, a region marred by Nazi occupation and Communist oppression, has always been a cocktail of confusion. Despite Milan Kundera’s controversial attempts to demarcate the boundaries of Central Europe, the region remains an ambiguous territory of which only shared history is multiculturalism, multilingualism and ever-shifting borders. A mélange of blatant betrayals and subtle propaganda which led to collective ethnic cleansing, culminated in pogroms and post-war repatriation policies, as well as personal brainwashing of prejudice gilded in the name of nationalism, Central European history is a distillation of dark humour and (e)strange(d) politics. In Emil Hakl’s *Of Kids and Parents (O rodičích a dětech)*, published in 2002, translated into English by Marek Tomin and released as a film adaptation in 2008, social(ist) problem, as well as Kundera’s Czech myth, is presented “with a human face” and challenged by two familiar faces. Father and son go on a drinking odyssey around Prague and discuss the so-called “European civilisation”, family, immigrant life, post-war repatriation, fleeting memories, death and nihilism, among other random topics over pints of beer, glasses of much stronger substance and typical greasy pub food, with occasional “draining” intermissions at the men’s toilet. A “pub crawl” through the social and political upheavals of the twentieth century, of which the impact can still be felt on a personal level, *Of Kids and Parents* exposes the absurdities embedded within the common question in the Czech language “So what’s new?” [“Tak copak je nového?”] and within any attempt to fix and fixate on the “central/periphery” dichotomy as readers, along with the characters, become inebriated with and sobered from the (re-)constructed narratives that bind individuals together equally as “kids” of regimes and ideologies as well as “masters”, according to Vaclav Havel, of their own ever-changing fate.

Keywords: Central Europe, Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, Czech Literature, Emil Hakl

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In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera lays out his definition of “Central Europe”:

CENTRAL EUROPE. Seventeenth century: The enormous force of the baroque imposes a certain cultural unity on the region, which is multinational and thus polycentric, with its shifting and indefinable boundaries. The lingering shadow of baroque Catholicism persists there into the eighteenth century: no Voltaire, no Fielding. In the hierarchy of the arts, music stands at the top. From Haydn on (and up through Schoenberg and Bartók) the center of gravity of European music is there. Nineteenth century: A few great poets, but no Flaubert; the Biedermeier spirit: the veil of the idyllic draped over the real. In the twentieth century, revolt. The greatest minds (Freud, the novelists) revalidate what for centuries was ill known and unknown: rational and demystifying lucidity; a sense of the real; the novel. Their revolt is the exact opposite of French modernism’s, which is antirationalist, antirealist, lyrical (this will cause a good many misunderstandings). The pleiad of great Central European novelists: Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz: their aversion to romanticism; their love for the pre-Balzac novel and for the libertine spirit (Broch interpreting kitsch as a plot by monogamous Puritanism against the Enlightenment); their mistrust of History and of the glorification of the future; their modernism which has nothing to do with the avant-garde’s illusions. (Kundera 1990, 124-125)

Despite Kundera’s pedantic and controversial attempt to demarcate the artistic and intellectual boundaries of Central Europe by means of tracing its history from the seventeenth century, the region remains an ambiguous territory of which only shared history is multiculturalism, multilingualism and ever-shifting borders. From the excerpt, the literary and philosophical legacies of eighteenth-century Central Europe are defined against the backdrop of the legacies of Voltaire and Henry Fielding, the two satirists who form a distinctive part of the Western European canon. Kundera’s emphasis on the region’s supremacy of music among all the arts serves to further distinguish Central Europe from the rest of Europe. Though the Biedermeier trend, which ushered in and reflected the rise and growth of middle-class

population and artistic taste in Central Europe between the years 1815 and 1848, is mentioned in Kundera's definition, the development of nineteenth-century Central European literature took its course without Gustave Flaubert and his deliberate vacillation between Romanticism and Realism. Finally, arriving at the twentieth century in Kundera's historical survey, the chasm between Central Europe and Western Europe is rendered unbridgeable as Kundera posits the notion of Central European Modernism as the complete opposite of avant-garde French Modernism in its realist tendency and its sober disillusionment with the past.

If Central European Modernism is the antithesis of its Western European counterpart, the excerpt begs crucial questions: What about "Eastern Europe"? What is its position in Milan Kundera's cultural, literary and geopolitical cartographies of Europe? As part of an attempt to ask further questions regarding my proposed questions, the excerpt also invites the reader to return to an interview of Kundera by Philip Roth in 1980.

PR: And yet, are not the fates of Eastern Europe and Western Europe radically different matters?

MK: As a concept of cultural history, Eastern Europe is Russia, with its quite specific history anchored in the Byzantine world. Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, just like Austria have never been part of Eastern Europe. From the very beginning they have taken part in the great adventure of Western civilization, with its Gothic, its Renaissance, its Reformation--a movement which has its cradle precisely in this region. It was here, in Central Europe, that modern culture found its greatest impulses; psychoanalysis, structuralism, dodecaphony, Bartók's music, Kafka's and Musil's new esthetics of the novel. The postwar annexation of Central Europe (or at least its major part) by Russian civilization caused Western culture to lose its vital center of gravity. It is the most significant event in the history of the West in our century, and we cannot dismiss the possibility that the end of Central Europe marked the beginning of the end for Europe as a whole ("Most Original Book", 1980)

"Eastern Europe", Kundera asserts, "is Russia" ("Most Original Book", 1980). The need to distinguish Central European culture, which according to Kundera has been part of the "Western Civilisation" and its artistic and cultural movements, from Russian and Eastern European cultures reflects his anxiety for the fate of the Czech nation and culture threatened by the prospect of extermination:

But after the Russian invasion of 1968, every Czech was confronted with the thought that his nation could be quietly erased from Europe, just as over the past five decades 40 million Ukrainians have been quietly vanishing from the world without the world paying any heed. ("Most Original Book", 1980)

I also argue that Kundera's choice of the term "Central Europe", instead of "East-Central Europe" or "Eastern Europe", can be regarded as a continuation of the legacy of the Czech historian František Palacký (1798-1876). Palacký claims that the Czech people are the centre and the heart of Europe and that the Czech culture functions as a bridge between the East and the West:

The history of the Czech nation is in numerous respects more instructive and more interesting than the history of many other nations. As the Bohemian Lands are located in the center, the heart of Europe, the Czech nation has for many centuries been the central point where elements and principles of national, State, and Church life in modern Europe have, not without a struggle, been in contact. The long conflict as well as the intermingling of Roman, German and Slav elements in Europe is particularly evident here. (Palacký 2007)

Enhancing Palacký's Czech myth, with its emphasis on the geographical and socio-political centrality of the Czech nation and culture in Europe, Kundera universalises the angst accumulated from centuries of wars and oppression and turns the plight of Central Europe into a shared "European crisis" (Kundera 1990, 11):

Husserl's lectures on the European crisis and on the possible disappearance of European mankind were his philosophical testament. He gave those lectures in two capitals of Central Europe. This coincidence has a deep meaning: for it was in that selfsame Central Europe that, for the first time in its modern history, the West could see the death of the West, or, more exactly, the amputation of a part of itself, when Warsaw, Budapest, and Prague were swallowed up by the Russian Empire. This calamity was engendered by the First World War, which, unleashed by the Hapsburg empire, led to the end of that empire and unbalanced forever an enfeebled Europe. (Kundera 1990, 11)

Kundera's venture to define Central Europe remains deeply "Western" Eurocentric in its ostracisation of Russian and Eastern European cultures. However vehement his attempt to establish "on centre stage" the centrality of Central Europe in terms of politics, history and culture seems, Central Europe, with Czech culture as its heart, remains a mere "laboratory", where political and cultural experiments of Western Europe take place:

The destruction of the Hapsburg empire, and then, after 1945, Austria's cultural marginality and the political nonexistence of the other countries, make Central Europe a premonitory mirror showing the possible fate of all of Europe. Central Europe: a laboratory of twilight. (Kundera 1990, 125).

Kundera's "laboratory of twilight" (Kundera 1990, 125) concept therefore exposes the ways in which he uses history not only as a fixed reference point, but also as a means to justify his understanding of the role and position of Central Europe. The result paradoxically subverts as well as deconstructs his own carefully constructed premise of a typical

“Czech fate”. My argument finds its resonance in Liisa Steinby’s critique on Kundera’s eurocentrism in *Kundera and Modernity*:

Kundera ignores the critique of Eurocentrism common in contemporary political and cultural debates. The postcolonial perspective emphasizes that European history and art, or what in Europe is defined as rationality, cannot be identified with history, art, and rationality as such, as assumed traditionally following the Enlightenment; critics of Eurocentrism see in this generalization an unjustifiable claim to European supremacy. Conversely, according to Kundera, it is precisely Europe—as a cultural entity—which today is threatened and in need of advocates. Rather than acting as colonizer, Europe is in danger of being colonized (...). The first time Kundera experienced this happening was when the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and European culture was forced to withdraw. (Steinby 2013, 14)

The paradox lies in Kundera’s subversion of the role and position of Central Europe. Though he strives to portray the existence of Central Europe as being under threat, that is, being colonised by the Soviet regime, Kundera nevertheless fails to challenge and question the colonial ideology which underpins the dialectical relation between the coloniser and the colonised, between the centre and the periphery. History is seen and referred to as absolute truth, instead of what Michel Foucault terms as “technologies of power” (Foucault 2003, 146), which means methods, mostly carried out by education and military institutions, of constructing and instilling in the people the kind of belief and knowledge which sustains and propagates the ideology of power. This paradox of “failed subversion”, or “failed radicalism”, can also be seen reflected in Kundera’s life, from his involvement in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia as an aspiring reformist of Czech communism even after the Soviet invasion in 1968 to his subsequent public disputes with Vaclav Havel which took place before he left his home country for France in the year 1975. By taking refuge in the traditional concept of the Czech myth, as I have outlined, and by positing that the Soviet invasion is an inevitable part of the “Czech fate”, Kundera places hopes on the Communist party and the “Czechoslovak autumn” (Herman 2013) following the political unrest:

The significance of the new Czechoslovak politics was too far-reaching not to run into resistance. The conflict, of course, was more drastic than we anticipated, and the trials undergone by this new politics were brutal. But I refuse to call it a national catastrophe, as our somewhat tearful public tends to do today. I would even venture to say that, in spite of this public opinion, the significance of the Czechoslovak autumn may even surpass the significance of the Czechoslovak spring. (Herman 2013)

It is also worth quoting Vaclav Havel’s scathing response to Kundera’s optimistic, albeit some would say “naïve”, refusal to condemn the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968:

A quite logical link in this pseudo-critical illusionism...is Kundera’s concept of the “Czech lot.” I do not believe in this fate, and I think that first and foremost we ourselves are the masters of our fate; we will not be freed from this by pleading selfishness nor by hiding behind our geographic position, nor by reference to our centuries-old lot of balancing between sovereignty and subjugation. Again, this is nothing but an abstraction cloaking our concrete responsibility for our concrete actions... I see the summit of Kundera’s entire illusionist construct, however, in something even further: we supposedly stood -- for the first time since the end of the Middle Ages -- “at the center of world history,” because we strove -- for the first time in world history -- for “socialism without the omnipotence of the secret police, with freedom of the written and the spoken word [...]”: our experiment supposedly aimed so far into the future that we had to remain not fully understood. What a balm for our wounds! And yet what bombastic illusion! (Herman 2013)

Havel, who would later become the last president of Czechoslovakia in 1989 and the first president of the Czech Republic between the years 1993 and 2003, was apt to point out and also to expose the “bombastic illusion” (Herman 2013) in Kundera’s essentialisation of the Czech nation and the predestination of Czech fate.

I propose that Central Europe is not Kundera’s “laboratory of twilight” (Kundera 1990, 125), but instead a brawling pub where cocktails of ideology, as reflected by its history of physical and socio-political violence in Central Europe, a region marred by Nazi occupation and Communist oppression, are served. A mélange of blatant betrayals and subtle propaganda which led to collective ethnic cleansing, culminated in pogroms and post-war repatriation policies, as well as personal brainwashing of prejudice gilded in the name of nationalism, Central European history is a distillation of dark humour and (e)strange(d) politics. In Emil Hakl’s *Of Kids and Parents (O rodičích a dětech)*, published in 2002, translated into English by Marek Tomin and released as a film adaptation in 2008, social(ist) problem, as well as Kundera’s Czech myth, is presented “with a human face” and challenged by two familiar faces. Father and son go on a drinking odyssey around Prague and discuss the so-called “European civilisation”, family, immigrant life, post-war repatriation, fleeting memories, death and nihilism, among other random topics over pints of beer, glasses of much stronger substance and typical greasy pub food, with occasional “draining” intermissions at the men’s toilet. A “pub crawl” through the social and political upheavals of the twentieth century, of which the impact can still be felt on a personal level, *Of Kids and Parents* exposes the absurdities embedded within the common question in the Czech language “So what’s new?” [“Tak copak je nového?”] and within any attempt to fix and fixate on the “central/periphery” dichotomy as readers, along with the characters, become inebriated with and sobered from the (re-)constructed narratives that bind individuals together equally as “kids” of regimes and ideologies as well as “masters”, according to Vaclav Havel, of their own ever-changing fate.

During the time when this research paper is being written (October 2013), the Eurozone crisis is still running its course and its political impact can be felt on all levels, from day-to-day spending on groceries to the seemingly unrelated problem which ensues from the government's absurd budget allocation on education, where Arts and Humanities lecturers and researchers like myself are obliged to quantify their teaching and research impact in round figures. The question of whether Central Europe's strive towards becoming "the master of its own fate", as Havel stipulates in his article in response to Kundera, has been a landmark achievement or an impossible feat is and will still be open to debate in many years to come. However, the fact that such a debate has been taking place and is still taking place in the printed pages of unquantifiable works of fiction, as I shall illustrate, and of journalism, as in the case of Kundera-Havel controversy, testifies to the triumph of Havel's calling for a brave act of taking "concrete responsibility for our concrete actions" (Herman 2013) as opposed to hiding passively behind the imagined cloak of inevitability. Since demolition would have cost a fortune, I propose that the neat and orderly "laboratory of twilight" (Kundera 1990, 125), a mere reflection of European civilisation's grandeur and menacing plight, has to be ransacked before being completely "renovated", as in the fashion of many old Central European socialist buildings, into a pub where tangible experiences clink glasses with myths and abstractions. The drinking establishment, or the "public house", which is Central Europe in my understanding can be seen culminated in Hakl's description of a "pub in Bořivojova Street" (Hakl 2008, 85) in his novel:

I took a swig and realised Father was staring with a terrified expression at something in one corner of the room. I looked in that direction. There was a bunch of grown-up kids, their hair already going grey, lowering shots of green mint liqueur into freshly drawn pints of beer. The shots descended to the bottom of their mugs like small, heavy divers.

"Oh Christ..." Father said slowly.

...

"They're drinking a Magic Eye."

"Logic Eye?"

"Magic. Don't you know it?"

"No I don't, where could I have come across such an abomination? It's not something you actually drink, is it?"

"Of course, it's a classic cocktail, an essential part of the repertoire. We've been drinking it in Žižkov since I can remember."

...

"I've seen all kinds of things, but I'm sure I'd remember this sort of barbarity..."

"You remind me of a landlady from a pub in Bořivojova Street. In 1990 they opened this brand new place there on the corner where there'd always been a pub, but suddenly there were American flags everywhere, new tables and new staff..."

"And what about this landlady?"

"She was just like you. When we tried ordering Magic Eyes – we were feeling nostalgic – she had no idea what we wanted. A landlady! So we ordered beer and mint liqueur separately and when we dropped the shots into the beer glasses, this beast of a woman rushed over and started screaming: "I'm not having that in my establishment, you can do it anywhere else you like but not here! I'm not serving you another drink! Pay up and go!" We sat there staring at her and just couldn't think of anything to say, so we paid and left. (Hakl 2008, 84-86)

The geographical location of the pub bears significance in terms of historical dimension. Bořivojova street is located in Prague's Žižkov district. Žižkov district is not only rumoured to be the place where the number of pubs per capita is the highest of any city district in Europe, but also known to be the place of distinctive Czech history and culture. Historically a working-class area, as is sometimes referred to as "Red Žižkov", the Žižkov district was named after Jan Žižka (1360–1424), the famous Hussite general remembered in history as one of the greatest military leaders who never lost a battle and who took part in the Battle of Grunwald and rose to prominence during the Hussite Wars. During the Second World War, Žižkov district was also part of the Czech resistance movement as the families within the area gave refuge to the Operation Anthropoid parachutists. Žižkov district is also a district of artists and writers. Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923), best known for his novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*, wrote many of his works while living in the district and Jaroslav Seifert (1901-1986), poet and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1984, was a native of Žižkov. Franz Kafka was also buried at the New Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov. In my allegory, if the landlady in Hakl's description signifies the ruling political regime which cloaks its post-Cold War ideologies with newly renovated décor of the postcommunist 1990s, with "American flags everywhere" (Hakl 2008, 85) and the promise of uncensored freedom, it can be said that the pub on Bořivojova street of which she remains the owner stands for the physical and intellectual cartography of Central Europe with, according to Kundera, the Czech nation at its heart. Capitalism seems to be the new currency on which this new pub called Central Europe thrives. However, appearance can be deceiving. Liberation can be a mere illusion. The landlady, not wanting to accept differences in terms of cocktail recipes and drinking methods, retains the power to drive her customers away. Likewise, censorship and persecution prevail after the dissolution of the Iron Curtain, leaving imprints on the people's mentality: "why are you so outraged by someone drinking a Magic Eye?/"Because I'm not familiar with it and unfamiliar phenomena always lead to outrage" (Hakl 2008, 87). The fear of and adversaries towards differences and the unfamiliar are carried out in a different and a more subtle form, even. The cocktail of regional history and national identity which used to be acceptable as a norm and mainstream narrative of the Czech nation and of Central Europe as imagined communities at one point in time suddenly becomes unacceptable when it is "consumed" differently. It is also interesting to note that the customers who request such a

concoction of nostalgia choose to leave the pub in passivity. This reflects how years of fear and censorship have moulded a habit and mentality of non-confrontation among the citizens of the region.

In the conversation between a 44-year-old son and his 71-year-old father which takes place in a pub, the Czech myth is not only constantly referred to, but also mercilessly demystified and deconstructed:

“... Why exactly are you here, do you even know?”

“Because you made me.”

“Well that’s true, sorry about that, it happens... But why do you live in *Prague* all your life?”

“Because I’m afraid of changing my life for the worse. Prague is the only place where I can live.”

“And how do you know that if you’ve never tried it anywhere else?”

“Spending a week or two in some other town is more than enough time for me to see that I’d go bonkers from the nothingness, the lack of ambiguity, the *seriousness* of people’s lives there. Once you become a *tailor* there, all you can do is tow the line and remain a *tailor* until you die because that’s how everyone sees you no matter how hard you try to be something else.”

“And what don’t you like about that?”

“It’s boring! To take on one role and act it out until you completely decompose!”

“Whereas here?”

“Life unfolds here as if it were a comedy by Frič, or some touchingly naff Italian porno... Like the assassination of Heydrich performed by a children’s puppet theatre...”

“And you like that?”

“I like that very much.”

“What, for goodness’ sake, do you like about it?”

“The theatrical dimensions, the small space. The way a gangster has a similar social standing to a minister, and vice versa. All the clowning. All the messing around and rubbing of elbows... All those stories about how someone used to drink beer and play cards with the president...”

“A total circus.”

“But a merry one.” (Hakl 2008, 105-106)

Though the lure of Prague as a “merry circus”, or a theatre of black comedy, and the spirit of dynamic “ambiguity” shared among the Czech people are evoked by the son, the notion of Prague as the metropolitan centre of Europe is challenged by the son’s response to his father’s question “But why do you live in *Prague* all your life?” (Hakl 2008, 106). The son chooses to remain in Prague for fear of a worse living condition had he lived elsewhere. His remark reflects a paradox typical of a nation or a culture which has long been struggling to establish its identity through insularity. The inferiority complex of “the small space” (Hakl 2008, 106) tends to be perpetually aggrandised. The son’s answer therefore embraces yet, at the same time, refutes František Palacký’s celebration of the Czech nation as “the heart of Europe” (Palacký 2007) and of Milan Kundera’s jubilant optimism in his depiction of the Czech fate.

The father’s side of the story, however, further subverts and challenges the dialectical relation between “centre” and “periphery”. He recounts to his son the story of his father’s migration to Croatia, which formed part of Yugoslavia from 1918 to 1991: “The thing was that Father joined Tito’s army in the last year of the war, him – a factory owner – and no one could talk him out of it! He joined the Partisans to serve in the *thirteenth proletarian army*, as he never failed to point out...” (Hakl 2008, 28). A capitalist by circumstance, the father’s father left home to make his fortune in the city and later in a foreign land as an entrepreneur: “He was the youngest of four children, three of whom were brothers and so he got some money from his father to start him off and went out into the world to make his fortune, that’s how it was” (Hakl 2008, 30). The promise of a post-war socialist Croatia attracted the likes of the father’s father: “And why Croatia? To tell you the truth, I don’t rightly know why he went there, but a lot of Czechs did in those days. I guess they saw it as a land of opportunity.” (Hakl 2008, 30). The family remained in Croatia under Josip Broz Tito’s regime and witnessed the violence which took place as Tito’s “benevolent dictatorship” yielded less benevolent results to the Czech migrants, albeit those like the father’s father who had assisted in the National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia war effort, following the conflict between Tito and Joseph Stalin:

But when the war was over the executions and prison sentences began anew because the great comrade Tito began settling accounts with his enemies, first it was the former gendarmes, the monarchists, you know, and then Communists started getting rid of Communists, as always happens everywhere, you know, it’s always the same story, the only difference between events of this kind is the way they’re later interpreted. (Hakl 2008, 28)

When “Communists started getting rid of Communists” (Hakl 2008, 28) in Zagreb, the irony and absurdity of war and warring ideologies became more evident in Croatia than in the “merry circus” of Prague in Central Europe, the heart of Europe. Faced with persecution and unjust treatment, particularly in the form of Tito’s nationalisation policy, the family left their home in Croatia for Czechoslovakia. Little did they know that their plight of being the victims of conflicting and confusing ideologies did not end when they left Yugoslavia. “Titoism”, ironically, has been translated into a threat in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, as Anne Applebaum points out in *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-56*:

Eventually ‘Titoism’, or ‘right deviationism’, became a very serious political crime: in the Eastern European context, a ‘Titoist’ was someone who wanted his national communist party to maintain some independence from the Soviet communist party. Like

‘Trotskyism’ the term could eventually be applied to anyone who objected (or appeared to object, or was accused of objecting) to the mainstream political line. ‘Titoists’ also became the new scapegoats. If Eastern Europe was not as prosperous as the West, then surely ‘Titoists’ were to blame. If shops were empty, ‘Titoists’ were at fault. If Central European factories were not producing at the expected level, ‘Titoists’ had sabotaged them. (Applebaum 2012, 271)

The “theatrical dimensions” (Hakl 2008, 106) of violence for which the son later expresses his fondness was therefore waiting for them in Central Europe:

“...What was it you were asking me, oh yes, why our family came back. Well, for one thing, immediately after the war they started nationalising and even though my father had a few perks on account of his activities in the resistance and they let him sell the factory, in other words, he didn’t lose absolutely everything, even so he’d had just about enough of it. His idea was to come back to Bohemia and set up a tie-making factory with his cousin Vilda, all he ever talked about was how he and Vilda were going to have a *little tie* factory and how they were going to live in peace and quiet. So they sent me to Prague in 1945, I didn’t really want to go, I wanted to go to the naval academy, didn’t I... So my parents came up in 1948 and within two years the Communists had thrown my father in prison and I’d gone to work in a factory.”

“Hmm, that’s the way it goes.”

“Exactly, you’d think people would learn their lesson, but they never do, especially not here in Bohemia. That’s why my father wanted to return, on account of this pipedream about a land of milk and honey that all the Czechs in Yugoslavia had envisaged in a fixated sort of way, they kept sighing about how great it was going to be when Doctor Beneš and his wife Hana returned to Prague Castle and they’d have sausage and Pilsner beer and go for a stroll in Stromovka Park... And about Honza Masaryk, you know, and how Churchill won’t let Stalin take... and so on and so on.”

“*Churchill* was one of the first words I registered as a child, *Churchill* and *Krushchev*.” (Hakl 2008, 29)

When the father’s father was in Bohemia, Yugoslavia was envisioned as an El Dorado. When the father’s father and his family were living in Yugoslavia, Bohemia haunted his dreams as he looked upon his native country as a land of milk and honey. The lived and living experiences of three generations of the characters in *Of Kids and Parents* put to question and eventually dismantle the centrality of the centre/periphery dichotomy as a means of structuring national identity, which is reflected in the fixed cultural territories of West, Central and East Europe stipulated by Milan Kundera.

To conclude, Kundera’s attempt to fix and fixate on the Czech fate and the position of Central Europe as European civilisation’s “laboratory of twilight” (Kundera 1990, 125) can be heard echoed in the most common question in the Czech language “So what’s new?” [“Tak copak je nového?”] which, I imagine, is constantly being uttered in numerous pubs in Bořivojova Street and beyond:

“So what’s new?” I asked.

“Nothing’s been new in this world for more than two billion years, it’s all just variations on the same theme of carbon, hydrogen, helium, and nitrogen,” Father answered. (Hakl 2008, 10)

From the excerpt, the father takes the question literally, instead of its typical meaning “how are you?” which most people would have understood it to mean. Emil Hakl’s treatment of such a question, which culminates in the father’s reply “Nothing’s been new in this world for more than two billion years” (Hakl 2008), exposes and ridicules an individual’s as well as a nation’s constant need to detect differences and define meanings to the point of obsession. Mutability, the father points out, is not only the heart of natural phenomena but also the basis of life, both on personal and national level, itself:

“Something’s always happening! Even if you’re sitting at home in your comfy armchair, something’s always happening! Increasingly sophisticated viruses are continuously trying to reprogram the way your cells work, antibiotics have almost lost their potency, organisms are being cloned, almost every day an animal species disappears from the planet, the darkies have got the atomic bomb, that’s not enough for you? Entire nations are being displaced around the world, is that not enough for you?” (Hakl 2008, 53)

The world of mutated violence and distorted ideologies that is Central Europe is not a passive laboratory where political experiments are carried out, quantified and recorded in neat tables and diagrams. What is new in this region, as well as in life, cannot always be detected, understood, quantified and explicated. “The world”, Václav Havel asserts, “is not composed -- even though it would be very comforting to think of it that way -- of dumb superpowers that can do everything and clever little nations that can do nothing” (Herman 2013). In this world, as in life, nothing is black and white. There are no fixed “centres” and “peripheries”, only the rise and fall of power. Whatever one’s stance is regarding these matters, true to Havel’s liberal spirit, they are now at least open to debate after years of silencing. And where else does a good debate take place? Perhaps we shall find a pub in Bořivojova Street with a certain grumpy-looking landlady and spark this debate with a dubious cocktail of the region’s history, but this time refusing to ever leave our seats in submissive silence.

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