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Democratization and Reinvented National Identity
Contradictory Trends?

Introduction

Others and frontiers, these are the two conceptual points around which Europe has built its identity. ... A certain unease follows the disappearance of the opponent, the mirror in which Western Europe contemplated itself for so long, nurturing its narcissism.

Ugrešić, 1998a: 244, 1998b: 304

More than fifteen years have passed since the Fall of the Berlin Wall heralded the official end of the Cold War, and with it the demise of Western Europe’s ‘Other’. Central and Eastern Europe, the ‘Cinderella’ societies, were to come to the ball, to be granted access to the freedoms, the pleasures, the opportunities of West European liberal democratic market societies. Indeed the imagery with which this process has been depicted, especially in the case of German unification, is that of a marriage between the materially and spiritually impoverished East (as petitioner or would-be bride) with the affluent and morally superior West (as the strong and protective prince).

Novelist and essayist Dubravka Ugrešić refers to the ‘love between East and West Europe’, as a ‘story’ in which ‘Eastern Europe is that sleepy, pale beauty, although for the time being there is little prospect of an imminent marriage’ (Ugrešić, 1998a: 236, 1998b: 297). Susan Gal and Gail Kligman write of the ‘Cold War shadow boxing’ in which ‘frequently, the rivalry between East and West was veiled and indirect, each side assuming instead of mentioning the other’s existence as a competitive or
negative model’ (Gal and Kligman, 2000a: 9). The removal of this political ‘Other’ has been uncomfortable for both sides, but especially for the West, since it was after all the West (exemplified in Ronald Reagan’s description of the Soviet Union as ‘the Evil Empire’) that was responsible for reinforcing the binary already implicit in Lenin’s and Stalin’s concepts of the ‘class enemy’. Obviously the East–West binary constructed twin monoliths, obscuring multiple other layers of difference, between and within countries in Central and Eastern Europe such as those of culture, national identity, gender and class.

Even today, East and West continue to serve as mutual foils, mirroring each other in discourses that reinforce mutual prejudices. These oppositions testify to the apparent inability to define ‘Our’ identity without the existence of Another constructed as inferior to us. Dubravka Ugresic notes that ‘Europe has rarely integrated, rather it has tended to banish. So the inhabitant of Europe has adopted ... the basic notions: us, Europeans, and them, people from beyond the border’ (Ugresić, 1998a: 243–4, 1998b: 303–4). She cites Zygmunt Bauman feeling ‘tempted to say that the post-war creation (or, rather, re-creation) of Europe proved to be ... thus far the most lasting consequence of the communist totalitarian episode’, from which a ‘new European self-identity re-emerged, in an almost textbook fashion, as a derivative of the boundary’ (Bauman, 1995: 244). The ‘Wall in our heads’, as East German dissidents earlier named it, still remains. The ‘loss of the opponent’ has not eliminated the gendered imagery of the East as a woman, and a poor, disadvantaged one at that. Nor has it led to a culture of reciprocity, or lessened mutual misunderstandings in constructions of the ‘Other’.

Current Western media discourses about Central and Eastern Europe reflect these continuing prejudices. They tend to take one of two forms. The first centres on fears fomented by European Union enlargement. Media reports indulge in scare-mongering about the possibility of a mass migration of labour from the poorer East to the purportedly more affluent Western labour market. The second makes more explicit the tendency already implied here to foment a ‘moral panic’. By playing on prejudice focused on questions of ethnicity and gender, it whips up primitive fears of a loss of national identity through being engulfed by the ‘Other’, specifically by Roma on the one hand and by East European prostitutes and/or trafficked women on the other. Media accounts construct an opposition between Russia and Eastern Europe as the main sending countries and West European countries as the principal destinations for trafficked women in the sex industry, sometimes depicted as being a larger and more profitable industry worldwide than the drug trade.