

E- me
D- Daria Leontieva
MK- Marite Kuus
K- Kaarin Aavik
MA- Mathilde Arens
An- Anonymous

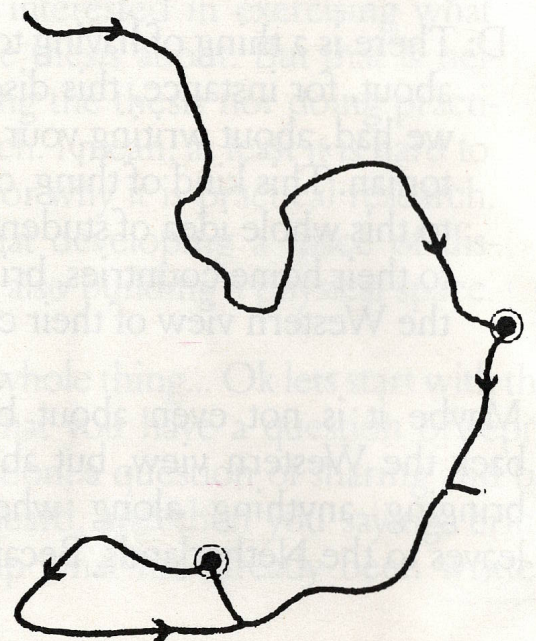
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'Eastern Europe only exists in the West... Eastern Europeans have the same interests, the same relationship to the state, and the same institutional hurdles; group members recognise each other even when they don't know each other because they fall under the same stereotype. Eastern Europeans are an imagined community, a nation born out of transition, imposed and defined by others, rather than its nationals'

→ Kajet Journal 'On Communities'

D: There is a thing of having to choose, or about, for instance, this discussion that we had, about writing your thesis in Estonian. This kind of thing, coming back to this whole idea of students returning to their home countries, bringing along the Western view of their country.¹

E: Maybe it is not even about bringing back the Western view, but about not bringing anything along when one leaves to the Netherlands. Because that is the idea, to go and study something new, whatever that may be. That suddenly, when I come here, I realise 'okay, all kind of theory, literature, everything that I learned in Estonia, doesn't really have a position here' I myself forget these references deliberately, because no one else can relate to them who is located here, including none of my immediate teachers.



But why do I do that?

Is it because I need to relate to my teachers?

Is it because I am trying to re-define my position?

Is it due to embarrassment about being from Eastern Europe?

Why do I decide to forget all of these opportunities for references, in favour of learning the 'new art'?

Why does it have to be a new department in my head?

Why am I unable to consciously relate my cultural experiences from my home country to the education that I get here?

Is it because it is not expected of me?

It is a taboo to point out that someone's work is very 'Korean' or very 'Danish'. No doubt that comes off as offensive, racist even. Sometimes it is as if our differences should not be recognised, yet we cannot be the same in terms of our values and experiences. This is indeed a slightly populist attitude, but a mild version of it is what I would like to point out. I, too, am conflicted, since I do not quite understand why I would feel offended if someone pointed out that I am not from Western Europe. If I were doing a theory class presentation and suddenly the teacher asked, 'Can you relate this topic to your cultural experience of being Eastern European?', I would probably question the relevance of the comment.

Why can I not bring my cultural differences as an advantage, to bring more juice to the discussion? After all, this question is not about my race, or about gender or something else that would inherently be offensive or derogative.

Can it be that I myself apply emotionality to the question?

Another byproduct of this phenomenon is my difficulty to develop interest in majority of the theory or topics that are being discussed in the Academy. So far I have made the hardest attempt to grasp why some people find this or that important, interesting, even trying to redefine myself as Western to step in their shoes.²

For quite some time, I could not understand why there is so much talk about coloniality and white guilt. It seemed irrelevant to me, since the discussion in Estonia has always been very different. We do not talk about colonies as something currently relevant, because we were not involved in that aspect of European history. We ourselves were a colonised region, in a

way, although not quite in the same way, and we have not had to hold on to that history as strongly. We have had the advantage of shedding the memory of our enslavement quite easily, by assimilating to the Western culture and whiteness. I think we really think of ourselves as an old breed, but a modern country, thus developing an odd (non-)identity.

But who are Eastern Europeans, really? Is it even possible to define such a thing, or talk about an Eastern European perspective, and why? I mean perspective also in terms of the habit of polarizing, especially among political views, and more specifically governing methods. (i.e., the comparison of capitalism vs. communism) By approaching this idea of Eastern European I am also trying to approach the idea of not choosing a side but rather reflecting on the benefits of both sides. There is a lot to learn from histories that have experienced the socialist regime, the history that we have carefully buried. Understandably, it is a sensitive topic to approach anywhere in Eastern Europe. I am trying to take this opportunity, being elsewhere, to think about it with people who have a different background. This contemplation is not about Eastern Europe, but about the concept and phenomenon of it. About how we discuss it, what it represents politically and how it is an illustration of human tendencies.

'The truth is that Eastern Europe belongs less to the geographical recorder in road atlases than to psycho-geography. It isn't really a place, but a state of mind'

→ "Goodbye, Eastern Europe" Jacob Mikanowski

'Eastern Europe is neither one nor the other, but also both, or rather, as we will see, beyond both.'

→ 'What is Eastern Europe? a philosophical approach'

J. Sušitska/ Philosophy, Society and the Cunning of 5 History in Eastern Europe, p.43

'... it is the presence of the non-West within the West, and vice versa. After all, it is most certainly not the West, and yet not its Other. ... neither civilized nor wholly barbaric, neither orderly nor entirely chaotic, neither cultured nor in the state of nature ... Neither familiar nor exotic, or both familiar and exotic, it

embodies the oneness of the West and its Other and becomes a source of their possible harmony.'

→ -//- p. 47

'Why is Eastern Europe beyond any of the usual dichotomies? Why is it more than the distinct cultures that comprise it? Is it impossible to be two (or three etc.), i.e., is it impossible to be a sum, to be both or several selves simultaneously?'

→ -//- p. 475

MK: It seems that a lot of these countries that were part of the Soviet Union, they didn't really exist in peoples' minds until 1991, so in terms of 'the wider world', it seems like it is quite new³. It is not that they don't want to, but they just don't realize that this was there the whole time. It seems like these are new countries and they don't have anything, due to the Iron Curtain...⁴

E: Yes, but the issue here is the fact that all of these satellite states were always there, the only thing that now is different is that we (post-socialist countries) have direct access and permission to the aspiration of being validated by the Western knowledge sphere. We are increasingly looking for the 'yes-word' for participating in a discourse, that we ought to be approved by Western academics, artists etc... And knowledge only moves toward the east, and not from the east.⁵ It is as if we by ourselves have nothing to offer and are always running after this idea. And even just the fact of whether we existed or not, is from this perspective that we have here in the academy, this Western gaze. It is enough, that we were there, we do not need to be on the map by the Dutch people, for them to know that we are there.

'.. I am neither a European nor a non-European, neither a citizen of the West nor from the Third World; I don't have a culture unless I create my own.'

→ 'What is Eastern Europe? a philosophical approach' J. Sušitska/ Philosophy, Society and the Cunning of History in Eastern Europe, p.47

'...you can change, you can be with the Other, you can exchange with the Other while being yourself, you are not one, you are multiple, and you are yourself. You are not lost because you are multiple. You are not disjointed because you are multiple.'

→ Edouard Glissant in 'One World in Relation' directed by Diawara, Manthia. 9'05''

'To be an Eastern European is to be an amateur, a dilettante, in any case, a non-professional. This is not to say that there are no professionals in the countries that are often identified as Eastern European, but that this particular way of being is incompatible with the idea of expertise and competence that is claimed by and strived towards in the West. Such amateurism is divine or perfect precisely because it leaves ample room for creativity, because the constraints of precision and efficiency do not hinder it from acknowledging its fallibility, uncertainty, its lack of exact knowledge. This "all too human" character of Eastern Europe is treacherous: the bribes, the cruelty, the negligence, to mention but few of its Medusa instantiations.'

→ 'What is Eastern Europe? a philosophical approach'
J. Sušitska/ Philosophy, Society and the Cunning of History
in Eastern Europe, p.46

'Through finding sameness with others with similar repressed experiences, they find sameness with the whole of humanity - empowerment is reassurance of one's legitimacy as a human being, sameness in spite of difference'

→ 'Towards respectful dwelling' M. Muuk

K: I think I always knew that I was from Eastern Europe, but in high school⁶ in the second week, I was automatically put as an organiser into the Eastern European culture week, which surprised me. I'd say that was even the first time when I was pressured to identify as Eastern European. This identity kind

of went without saying. My identity as an Eastern European definitely had not reached this far, for me it was more of a fact than an identity, and I felt that was really put upon to me, as in 'you must now be as an Eastern European foremost' even though that was not my thought. My identity always came first as an Estonian and then, perhaps, an European.

E: Do you feel like you also played the part at some point? What was the difference that was made, maybe even about cultural references?

K: I embraced the identity when I saw that when people place me as Eastern European, it puts me in a box. And that box was definitely not positive, it was full of stereotypes, i.e 'am I Russian, do I support Putin, am I poor'. And I took this identity, kind of trying to fight against people who put this on me. I remember I had a discussion with one of my class-

mates about why he shouldn't hang the USSR flag in a public place in our school, and sing the anthem in the evenings. He was from Italy. The thing is, before, I never got offended by USSR symbols and I didn't really look into the past, but now as these symbols are basically used as 'left' symbols, then I really started to take it as my job to perhaps pick up a few fights with people and educate them.

My aim has never been to take a role of bringing a discussion about Eastern Europe on the table, since all its content would/should in reality be about relating to the aspect of questioning why there even is such a definition as Eastern Europe. In my perspective, that is the only thing 'a discussion about Eastern Europe' could contain. But when I am reiterating something that I am against in itself already, it becomes a Janus-faced god.

Some scholars do make it out to be a very positive thing, a suggestion. They do not see this dilemma to be in need of a solution but rather see it as an approach to identifying, observing our position. They also point out an aspect of struggle, in regards to imagining an alternative curriculum for theory, as there is no such thing as 'the Eastern European discourse'. This term has no meaning, yet it means a lot, hence I cannot really call any cultural phenomenon 'Eastern', as opposed to 'Western', as in 'this is an Eastern European thing...'

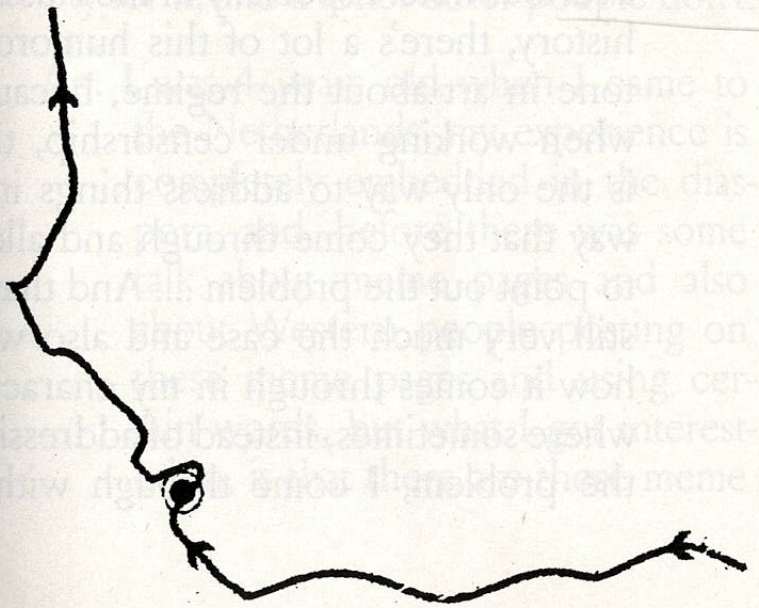
'... Eastern Europe is able to understand the West better than it could ever comprehend itself: being neither the West nor non-West it embodies the idea that the self is movement, and so any self or any culture that desires its own permanent stability is ultimately heading towards its demise.'

→ 'What is Eastern Europe? a philosophical approach'
J. Sušitska/ Philosophy, Society and the Cunning of History
in Eastern Europe p.48

Why is there a need to identify, why would it be unacceptable to perpetually question our position?

Doubting oneself can be both a benefit and a trap. For the West, there is no such thing as 'doubting oneself', really, to themselves: they are just re-exploring what is already there. This does not manifest itself in doubting whether what they find is part of their culture, whether it is important... there is no necessity to prove its importance because that is already taken for granted.⁷ But if the subject is not from the West, then instead of it just being an exploration, it is deemed a discovery, as if to say that Columbus 'discovered' America, although America was there regardless of its nomenclature.

Being doubtful, trying to prove that there is something there, or that there is something to research in the post-socialist capitalist sphere/region, and then aspiring to discover the hidden aspects of political science that have been overlooked, that in itself is patronising. Why can it not just be for itself, why is this not enough?



'Indeed it has nothing to do with memory or remembering but rather with forgetting or repressing one's past. The older people who idealize their youth which they associate with the Soviet period or sometimes exclusively with representations, and the youngsters who were already born after the collapse of the USSR and have no Soviet memory of their own, are offered a convenient version of a theme park-cum souvenir shop-cum restaurant nostalgia.'

→ "Postcolonialism & Postsocialism in fiction and art"
M. Tlostanova, p.100

'... the possibility that the experience of state social-

I think now we must be confident in the fact that we think our histories are important and that others can gain from the complexity and the knowledge of developing a discussion around them. Different generations and approaches, hence different ways of thinking from various parts of the world, can talk to each other, and shake each other up in a good way.

On the other hand, it could be argued, who can talk about what...¹²

I, for once, am the very embodiment of an eastern voyeur who comes and greedily consumes Westernness. I have encountered claims that the fact of me living here means that I am not up to date with what is happening back home. Which assumes that, instead of being up to date with what is happening at home, I would, in turn, be up to date with what is happening here in the Netherlands. That is definitely not the case.

Of course I am less engaged in the Estonian society than before moving here. However, I still consume the media and keep in contact with my family and friends back home. That gap then, that gap between the capacity of being up to date with Estonia and Netherlands. What is the gap in between filled up with? What is the situational knowledge that has been lost in the process?