WHY ARE WE STILL RESEARCHING EASTERN EUROPE AFTER 1989?

Academic Research on the "Other Europe"

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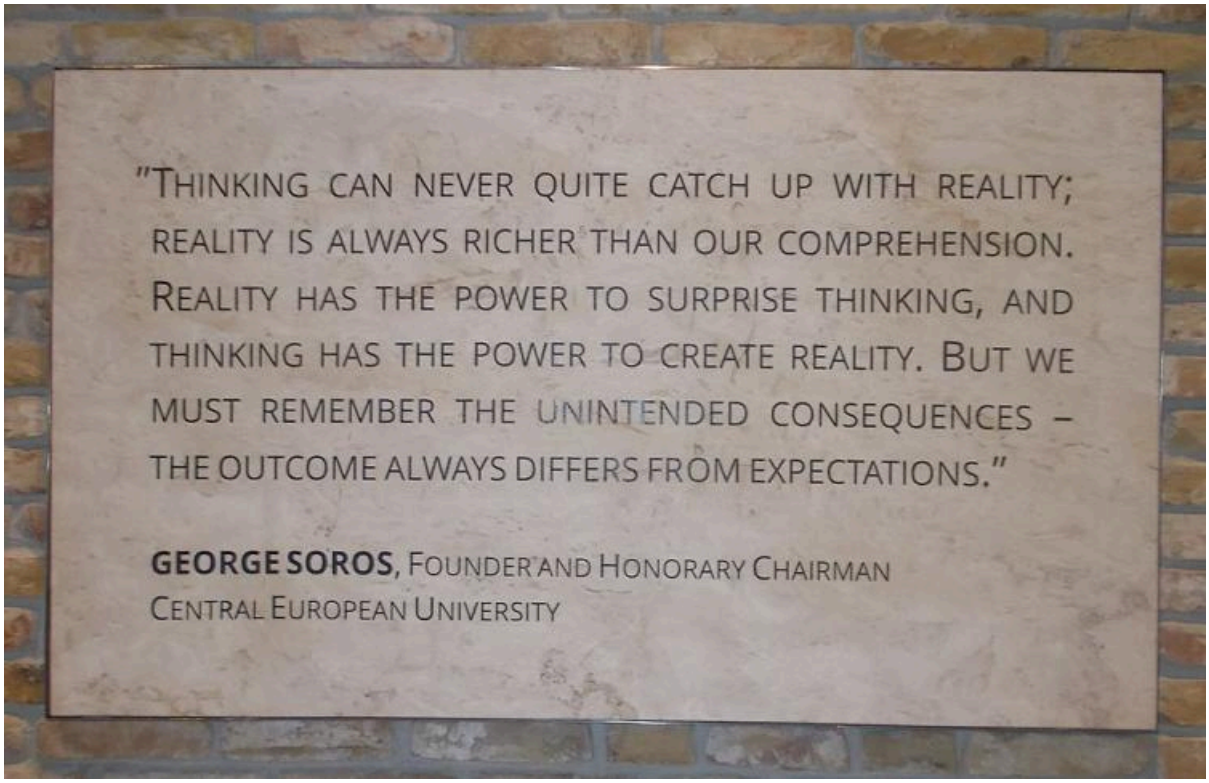

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Why are we still conducting research on Eastern Europe? In this article, I use two empirical case studies from the post-socialist period – the founding of the Central European University or "CEU" in Budapest and Eastern European research in the German Democratic Republic – to discuss how questions regarding the legitimacy and orientation of academic research into Eastern Europe were answered by the stakeholders in the field in the East and West following the end of the Cold War.

No scientific research is free from political influence, but regional sciences and area studies are particularly characterized by it. Historically it was (and perhaps still is?) common to categorize areas in favor of their "explorability". Thus, for example, in his "Orient Cycle", which was published in the late 19th century, writer Karl May referred to scientific papers and travel reports from western contemporary witnesses. In these papers, people from the Balkans and the Arabian Peninsula were described as violent and "wild", while their cultures were referred to as "backward". These stereotypes continue to shape our perception of certain regions of the world to this day and they have been used to legitimize attempted and successful imperial and colonial domination throughout history. The beginnings of the discipline of Eastern European Studies in the 19th century and at the start of the 20th century, and its huge expansion under the auspices of the Cold War, are a clear example of this. Eastern European Studies has historically been – and continues to this day to be – primarily a product of western knowledge production. The discipline has always been caught between an interest in research and knowledge and far-reaching geopolitical aspirations. In the case of Germany, this is still closely linked to the extermination policy of National Socialism and its lasting legacy. It wasn't until 1989 that an (attempted) overcoming of binary attributions of East and West began. How did Eastern European academics position themselves during this period? In this article, I will explore this question using two case studies: one from Hungary and one from the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Western theory, Eastern empiricism? The early years of the Central European University

In the spring of 1991, the world was still reeling from the revolutionary upheavals in Eastern Europe. In some Eastern Bloc countries, the socialist regimes used all their might and violence to cling onto power while the calls for independence grew ever louder in Eastern Europe. On March 31, the military structures of the Warsaw Pact were dissolved. Countries like Latvia and Georgia declared their independence. In Romania, the first free elections were held following the fall of Ceauşescu. In former Yugoslavia, a state of emergency was declared and a long war began. Across the board, the calls for independence were characterized by both a

liberal desire for democratic reform and by a nationalist desire to establish clear borders. New borders were drawn on the map of Europe, with these new demarcations often involving bloodshed.

In May 1991, whilst all of this was taking place, a group of young students met at a summer school entitled "The Process of Global Social Chance and the Historical Experience of Central Europe". It was organized by the "Central European University" (CEU), an educational initiative founded in 1989 and funded by the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros. It was accredited as a Hungarian-American university in 1991. The majority of the students on the course came from the Eastern Bloc and, despite the general spirit of optimism, they struggled to discuss globalization when their home countries were dominated by chaos, war, and poverty. The CEU's academic language was English. This was also completely foreign to many at the time and barely comprehensible as a result. In retrospect, one of the course leaders questioned whether it would have been better if he had spoken a Slavic language or at least had some sort of expertise in the region to enable him to enter into a truly productive dialog with the students. In the final report, the students also critically noted that – contrary to its title – the course barely touched upon the issues facing Eastern Europe. This was because the tutors didn't have the requisite knowledge and the "western" theories of globalization taught during the course were so far removed from the reality of their lives. In their respective countries of origin, it was the national state that was once again breaking through or breaking through for the first time after decades of socialist rule.[1]

Education was of central importance when it came to countering the specter of nationalism with an enlightened democratic counterpart. At least, this was the premise of the founding directors of the CEU and, above all, George Soros, who had the initial idea of creating a new university in response to the processes of change taking place in Eastern Europe. Although Soros was initially very keen on the idea of an Entrepreneur University, i.e., an academic institution focused on practical entrepreneurial skills, his fellow campaigners, many of whom were intellectuals and dissidents from the Cold War, convinced him of the need for a broad humanist education. The CEU was to become a "Bologna of the East" and to create community and democracy through shared content and a common language.[2] Inspired by his London-based academic teacher Karl Popper, he postulated the concept of the "open society" as opposed to the "closed societies" of socialism. Together with numerous other initiatives launched by the Open Society Foundation, the CEU became the "brain center" of Eastern European transformation societies. Its declared aim was to provide young people in the East with tools for critical thinking based on an alternative set of methods from social science and, in doing so, to build and consolidate the new democracies in the post-socialist region.

However, as the example of the 1991 summer school shows, this endeavor stood in stark contrast to the theoretical fatigue and even skepticism of many Eastern European academics

following years of indoctrination.[3] It also raised questions "about the usefulness of studying the West European model"[4] within the (post-)socialist context. In contrast, the desire expressed by the students for theories that could be applied illustrates the clear need for "practical" skills, particularly among the first generation of academics following the period of political upheaval. They were striving to acquire the skills they needed to navigate this new world.

How much Eastern European expertise does Eastern Europe need?

Initially, there was no clear consensus regarding how much specific knowledge about "Eastern Europe" and so-called regional expertise the new university should have. The "Central Europe" in its name is closely linked to this question of how important regional academic skills would be for the curriculum in the future. This contentious topic was discussed at the founding meeting of the CEU, which took place as part of a summer school at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik in the spring of 1989. Some people spoke in favor of a university with a "universal" curriculum.They argued that the age of regional studies was over. They believed that, within the context of the new unipolar world order, it was important to avoid being perceived as being too "provincial" by focusing on Eastern Europe. Others were strongly in favor of keeping the focus on Eastern Europe, since they saw themselves as experts in their own regions and were above all else perceived as "Eastern European scholars" rather than sociologists, historians, or geographers by the "West." The final compromise was "universal studies [...] combined with a regional accent in subjects."[5] As far as the name of the new university was concerned, Soros had drafted a proposal for a "Soros University" in April 1990 – i.e., one year after the meeting in Dubrovnik – but in the end, it was the name Central European University that prevailed, despite all the reservations. As the Hungarian historian Laszlo Kontler later recalled: "Once there is the brand, it is hard to change."[6]

Did researchers in the East produce research on Eastern Europe – and what has become of it?

New institutions like the CEU stood as lighthouse projects in the post-socialist university landscape, which was otherwise characterized more by continuity than ruptures. The academic research system in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) was the one exception to this; it practically ceased to exist following the reunification of Germany. In 1991, the liquidation of the university system in the GDR was in full swing. Following a resolution by the Science and Humanities Council in the summer of 1990, all academic institutions and their staff were to be evaluated and integrated into the Federal Republic of Germany's academic system by the end of the year. The majority of GDR academics lost their positions as a result

of this, with the humanities and social sciences particularly badly affected. In contrast to all the other former socialist countries, the Academies of Sciences and Humanities were "wound up." Some of the academic expertise was to be transferred to the newly founded institutes under West German management with a "mix" of East and West German staff.[7]

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What is now known as the Leibnitz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO, then the Humanities Centre for the History and Culture of Central Eastern Europe) in Leipzig was founded on October 30, 1995, as one of these seven new academic centers for the humanities. The "Research Focus on the Culture and History of Central Eastern Europe" was set up at the suggestion of Eastern European historian Klaus Zernack and under the aegis of the Max Planck Society. The Free State of Saxony agreed to provide basic funding and this was supported by inclusion in the German Research Foundation's (DFG) funding program. The then founding director, historian Winfried Eberhard, later recalled in conversation his meeting with the twelve future employees of the center – who had all been evaluated suitably positively – for the first time in March 1992 and how relieved he was to not be perceived "as a colonizer from the West." Instead, he found what he described as a "constructive" working atmosphere.[8] It says a lot about the difficult situation in which the GDR academics found themselves. In the words of Dieter Segert, who taught philosophy in the former East Germany at the Humboldt University, and later became a professor of political science with a focus on Eastern Europe at the University of Vienna: "And then all the departments were wound up and re-established. This is of course a construct that cannot legitimately occur because something is either superfluous or it is not. But it happened anyway. And everything was then up in the air."[9] The period following November 1989 was one of both revolutionary awakening and existential angst for Segert and many others. After a phase of self-renewal at many academic institutions, it quickly became apparent that the reform process would not be carried out according to their own standards (which

had to be negotiated at the time between the former GDR staff with differing opinions) as had been hoped and instead would take place largely according to West German premises.

This was especially true of research on Eastern Europe as "Eastern Europe" didn't exist. Although, from a "Western" perspective, Eastern Europe was long considered to be synonymous with the borders of the "Eastern Bloc", this was not the view of the countries of the region themselves. In light of this, the experts from the structural commissions did not come across any Eastern European research institutes; instead, they found institutes that focused on the "Culture and History of the Socialist Society," the "History of the Socialist World System," and the "History of the USSR and the People's Democracies."[10] When the Berlin wall fell, these academic disciplines with their clear ideological influence were the first to be abolished (unlike the diminished but largely preserved Slavic Studies). In their place, professorships for Eastern European and South-Eastern European History were created in Jena, Berlin, Halle, and Leipzig, as well as the Leipzig Institute for Eastern European Studies. These were based on the West German model and predominantly staffed by male professors from West Germany.

Why are we still researching Eastern Europe after 1989?

The question as to why Eastern European studies should continue to exist under the auspices of a united Europe is perhaps as simple as it is unsatisfactory to answer: The pressures of political change meant that there was no time (or rather, the academics of the time didn't take the time) for a critical self-examination and renewal of their own discipline. For many, the question simply didn't arise, as research on Eastern Europe was a "tried and tested" instrument of West German, Western European, and North American research – even though the research on Eastern Europe conducted at the start of the 1990s was a long way from critically examining its own problematic academic history. The two examples cited above show that, with regard to the CEU, there were indeed critical voices against a generalized concept of Eastern Europe and a genuine Eastern European Studies discipline, and that these voices were able to make themselves heard at the curricular level (which was particularly evident in the decision taken against Area Studies at the CEU). But, as the example of the GDR research institutes shows, in many other places, the "tried and tested" model of Eastern European research institutions was largely adopted due to the ease with which they could be integrated into the hegemonic Western academic system. Newly founded institutions – such as the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) in 1991, with its decidedly integrative understanding that put Eastern Europe on an equal footing with Western Europe – were the

exception rather than the rule.

English translation: LEaF Translations ↗

Footnotes

1. CEU Establishment, 1990–1992; HU OSA 203-20-1:2/4, Open Society Archive Budapest. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the OSA for supporting me with a Visegrad Scholarship in March 2023, which made this research possible. ↥
2. Unpublished spoken manuscript on the history of the CEU, Istvan Rev. ↥
3. Cf. Jan SURMAN and Daria PETUSHKOVA: Between Westernization and Traditionalism: Central and Eastern European Academia during the Transformation in the 1990s. In: Studia Historiae Scientiarum, 21 (2022), pp. 435–483. ↥
4. CEU Executive Committee Papers, 1991–1992, HU OSA 211-0-1:6/3, Open Society Archive Budapest. ↥
5. CEU: Historical papers, 1989–1990 1990; HU OSA 211-0-1:7/4, Open Society Archive Budapest. ↥
6. Notes from a conversation with Laszlo Kontler, 03/16/2023. ↥
7. Krijn Thijshijs: Die Evaluierer aus dem Westen und der Schein der Routine. Zur Begutachtung durch den Wissenschaftsrat am Beispiel der historischen Akademieinstitute in Ost-Berlin. In: Blecher, Jens/John, Jürgen (Hgg.): Hochschulumbau Ost. Die Transformation des DDR-Hochschulwesens nach 1989/90 in typologisch-vergleichender Perspektive, Stuttgart 2021 (= Quellen und Beiträge zur Geschichte der Universität Jena 16), pp. 169–198. ↥
8. Interview with Winfried Eberhardt, 08/30/2021. ↥
9. Interview with Dieter Segert, 09/13/2021. ↥
10. Lutz-Dieter Behrendt: Die Osteuropahistoriographie in der DDR. Das Beispiel Leipzig. In: Hundert Jahre osteuropäische Geschichte: Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft., ed. by Dittmar Dahlmann., Stuttgart, 2005 Steiner, (= Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des östlichen Europa), 2005, pp. 183–194. ↥