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Regaining Dignity in Europe

working paper - 1st Draft

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abstract: Nobody argues against human dignity despite not being able to define it yet we all have a sense of worth. In the following I will look at aspects of dignity in the European context in an interdisciplinary manner. I will focus on the philosophical, social and psychological aspect of the phenomenon of Eastern Europe within the European context and I will do so in the dignity framework. Firstly I will embed the problematic into the postcolonial framework and analyze the aspects of various 'post' in the European context, then I will briefly explain the theory of dignity and contextualize Europe in the regaining dignity process or rather explain how it cannot be done. This is a draft and as such a working paper, the final version will be delivered on the Reinventing Eastern Europe conference in Prague in November 2013.

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Eastern Europe might be an invention, the brainchild of western imagination. However, real or not, valid or invalid, the concept exists. The use of the concept validates it into existence. Eastern Europe is not a simple expression though because a whole ensemble of definitions and connotations surround it.

On its own, the geographical label is innocent and neutral, in socio-political context however, it sometimes has ambiguous connotations. If the term East Europe intends to denote lesser worth, if it is an adjective with a negative or belittling connotation than it is problematic and is usually rejected because it provokes a defence mechanism. A revisit to why the disparaging conceptualizations came about can be enlightening.

There are various definitions of Eastern Europe but roughly speaking it refers to the former Eastern Bloc, which is a historical term. Eastern Europe in a geographical sense of course remains, but its application in social, political, and economic sense is perhaps temporary.

The title of this conference is Reinventing Eastern Europe. I am not sure what is meant by "reinvention", that we try and fill it with positive connotations? Perhaps it is a good idea, a 'rebalancing act'. To my mind the notion is deeply rooted and it points not only at the ongoing socio-political attempts for cooperation – or lack of it - within the European Union but also at not-only-European social processes such as issues of othering and alterity creation, identity, and collective identity and questions of dealing with the past amongst others.

In the following I will look at aspects of dignity in the European context in an interdisciplinary manner. I will focus on the philosophical, social and psychological aspect of the phenomenon of Eastern Europe within the European context and I will do so in the dignity framework. Firstly I will embed the problematic into the postcolonial framework and analyze the aspects of various 'post' in the European context, then I will briefly explain the theory of dignity and contextualize Europe in the regaining dignity process or rather explain how it cannot be done. This is a draft and as such a working paper, the final version will be delivered on the Reinventing Eastern Europe conference in Prague in November 2013.

alterity making

Alterity making, othering, is part of categorization, a cognitive strategy, through which we make sense of the world around us. Being other, being different or looking for similarity and difference in others are normal processes. However, a qualitative judgement in favour of the one who judges, the creation of an alterity the *sole* purpose of which is consequential self-elevation is problematic and as such a potentially strong manipulative tool. It may lead to a false sense of superiority in face of the created other and as such it is a fallacy, usually the result of bad argumentation, a contextual analyses of which proves it wrong. Yet othering remains an easy rhetorical tool and as such a potentially strong political tool.

Othering in a negative sense works in vertical binary opposition thinking. In vertical binary opposition thinking a simple opposition is created in which one is qualitatively better in comparison to some other on a vertical scale of worth. The process of comparison and self elevation or degradation is an ongoing process and helps us make decisions and act upon them. However in a human dignity context, the evaluation of human worth along vertical axis is problematic (more on evaluation along vertical or horizontal axis please see Evelin G. Lindner's work). The line of thinking in which one thinks more worthy than another becomes potentially harmful especially so when normatives are derived and enforced based on this supposed inequality of worth. Colonialism is a form of relationship in which human worth is evaluated along vertical axis, in colonialism simple vertical binary opposition prevails.

postcolonial

Some consider the situation in East Europe a postcolonial one. This of course is debatable because the term colonial is so elastic. If however we ought to analyze the East European label within the postcolonial framework we have to contextualize it. Post-colonialism is a discordant term and in order to minimize misunderstanding a clarification of it is useful before it is applied at all. Firstly, can we talk about colonialism within Europe?

Colonialism is the uninvited control of an area which can take different forms with or without the physical presence of the coloniser who may or may not become a settler also. Colonial circumstances are different in each area of control, although some common traits are valid in all of them: the unequal characteristic of the relationship, the purpose of control over the colony being an urge for power, economic benefits, motivated to various degrees by the self-assumed moral superiority of the values of the coloniser and result in long lasting all pervasive influence on the society and culture (Chukwudi 1997; Fanon 1963; VanZanten 1994; Gyekye 1997; Loomba 2005; Said 1978,1980).

Another important aspect of colonialism is that the coloniser takes over the decision making over the occupied territory or has strong influence on it. To put it bluntly this is perhaps what has happened with the “satellite states”, perhaps we can talk about a colonial relationship between the USSR and the satellite states. In the Eastern Bloc the leaders of the countries were under ideological occupation which served as guidelines for political, social, security and economic decisions and as such permeated education, social structures and institutions.

I think that the *current* Eastern European circumstance is not postcolonial. If we use the term postcolonial it is to refer to the period *before* the fall of the iron curtain whereas the period of transition can be considered *decolonization*. Let me explain:

The post prefix denotes subsequence which is impossible to establish because the postcolonial is atemporal. A lot of what we consider postcolonial activity like writing against, protesting, thinking goes on during colonialism itself and as such it is not temporally subsequent. Samizdat, or what is called subversive literature made sense when the political rule needed to be changed.

Postcolonial is a reaction to colonial, as it tries to establish itself against subordination, as a defence mechanism and then it argues its existence. Postcolonial can be against the coloniser but also and mostly *against colonisation in principle*, overpowering as such, against subordination as such. Susan VanZanten compares the three post's: post colonialism, postmodern and post structuralism and finds their strategies similar to the extent that they rest upon “dismantling, unmasking or questioning the concepts of hierarchy and otherness” (VanZanten 1994). I don't want to get into literary methods and methods of literary writing or interpretation. I want to highlight the importance of writing strategies as modes of writing in horizontal binary opposition thinking, horizontal evaluation of worth, which to my mind is in line with dignity. Literary methods of writing and analyses coexist and mutually influence socio-political discourses. I argue that an urge to rid off of subordination is not merely a postcolonial occurrence but an ongoing urge against hegemonies and different forms of imperialism and as such it continues in democracy as well in a form of decolonisation and deconstruction.

Writing within the framework of horizontal evaluation of human worth and in reaction to vertical evaluation of human worth goes on in transitional periods and continues in democracies. *Relativising writing* is a mode in which the importance of context is accepted, nonfiniteness and as such non-fixedness is accepted yet it is understood that the whole picture or the widest context cannot be understood in its full scope. It remains a mode of writing of constant questioning.

remnants of the past

After the end of the oppressive system or in this case after the velvet revolution, there usually is a great urge to anew and a transitional period follows. If we remain in the colonial rhetoric we can talk about decolonization, which in different countries of the former Eastern Bloc took different forms. Decolonization is a transitional period in which the country or geographical area strives to re-establish itself as a new entity. According to some, the transitional period requires a transitional justice because when a country enters a new era it cannot simply wipe the slate clean and forget the past but it has to deal with the past. Transitional justice in one form or another took place in some countries of the former Eastern Bloc but not in others.

Communism, which differentiated the east was a political system, a form of government but the people in these countries were not different, perhaps we became different. The political organisation of a country affects all its citizens and changes the culture and mentality of the people regarding relationships, work ethic, respect and trust in authority and fellow citizens etc. Still, in communism not all people agreed with the systems just as not all Germans were Nazis. Yet we do not and as far as I know we didn't not even for a period of transition refer to Germany as post-Nazi yet we still, even after almost 25 years sometimes refer to Eastern Europe as post-communist. If one is offensive than why isn't the other.

Of course the reasons for this are complex. But in both cases we can talk about judging by the past. A wide-reaching denazification process took place in Germany after the war, but none such decommunization took place in the former Eastern Bloc – apart from east Germany. The arguments for and against transitional justice are manifold,

such as they can become which-hunts; the urgency of economic problems overcomes the need for debating; and perhaps a yearning for peace, for a kind of restorative transition.

Can we say that the lack of or limited delivery of transitional justice in some former Eastern Bloc is itself a reconciliatory attempt at restorative transitional justice? Can *not dealing* with past in an institutionalised format be restorative? Restorative justice is arguably the most suitable format in negotiated situations and it was chosen in South Africa (TRC) as a way of dealing with the past for its reconciliatory characteristics (Boraine 1994, 2000; Lodge 2002). The arguments for restorative justice (Tutu 1999; Gobodo-Madikizela 2008; Mandela 1994, 2003) and against it are manifold but I tend to agree with Soyanka who claims that uncovering the truths of the past will not have been revelatory, but an affirmation of what was previously denied, only knowledge is being shared (Soyinka 1999, 33). Yet the affirmation of the formerly denied, acknowledgement has a great force but it also cannot be forced.

Some argue, even in the east that it is correct to call some countries post-communist because the mentality and politics still resembles the one before the revolution simply because many people who were in positions of power never left the politics. Therefore the term post communist is often correct and rightly refers to people who just changed their 'uniform'. Transition has metamorphosed. England is not a post-coloniser anymore despite clinging to former territories. Germany went through a difficult post-war re-invention of itself and yes it is a sensitive issue and no German wants to be referred to as post-Nazi nor any Italian a post-fascista and similarly perhaps neither do people in the East want to be referred to as post-communists. People perhaps don't want to be referred to as Eastern Europeans in a way that Western Europeans don't want to be so.

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dignity

Many of you might be interested in why am I not talking about dignity yet, but I just have, othering, alterity making as well as postcolonial issues are closely connected to matters of dignity. Well, I will not define dignity in a sentence here because it is a complex concept but roughly speaking it is a theory of human worth. Dignity is a strong rhetorical tool, nobody argues against it, and most of us claim to have it, actually some claim to have more than others and that is when the concept gets discordant. In conflict situations sometimes both sides appeal to dignity as their motivation hence it obviously is sometimes problematic. I am happy to get into debate on definitions of dignity but it is not the main topic of this paper and indeed this conference, hence I will, for the purposes of this article, set the framework within which I am moving when I talk about regaining dignity in Europe or the lack of it.

In my work I separate dignity into two levels of analyses. One is human dignity, which according to the currently most prevalent conceptualisation we all allegedly have inherently, in other words human dignity it is a state of being we all possess, for some reason. The source of this human dignity is often transcendental, sometimes explained as a work of God or as human nature, it can be argued about and debated. Yet the question of the whereabouts of the source of human dignity as such is almost irrelevant to practical life.

Another level of analyses of dignity is *dignity as a quality* which is on a descriptive level, a kind of feeling. Therefore dignity has an intimate level where we can talk about the personal experience of it. Both these levels of analyses are relevant for us in connection with issues of Europeanisms, and Eastern Europe.

The term dignity and human dignity evolved, from Cicero, to Christian interpretations based on Imago Dei onto the conceptualisation of human dignity as a social contract in later Europe and onto the Enlightenment and the Kantian imperative and modernist interpretations such as dignity as agency as a normative capacity. (Cancik 2002; Ritschl 2002; Bayertz 1996)

The current most prevalent interpretation is within the framework of the human rights, that all humans have equal dignity, that we are all born in dignity. What dignity actually means is undefined in human rights treaties. So we have something equally what makes us human and that is human dignity. What is the difference between human dignity and humanness, well not much, the point is perhaps that human dignity sounds more majestic and perhaps it is but a good rhetorical tool, for some people a motivation for others a political tool to emotionally blackmail people to do something they want. But it is a concept which will not be discarded anytime soon, hence we deal with it is a phenomenon and try to understand why do we cling to it.

Human dignity is most often used in Europe and perhaps increasingly worldwide within the framework of human rights. Firstly, human dignity is not a human right in itself but the basis of human rights, human dignity is the corner stone of human rights.

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" goes the declaration, *therefore* and here comes the normative, we should act toward one another in the spirit of brotherhood. "The recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". The existence of dignity is declared equal and inherent and the recognition of this declaration will have secured justice, freedom and peace. The proof of the pudding is eating therefore only if we recognize inherent dignity and equal rights will we see whether its leads to freedom, justice and peace. It probably would. But we are yet to see it.

Inherent dignity is a thesis not a fact therefore we can only theorise about it as yet. In this theory human dignity is inherent and as such it cannot be given, taken away and neither can it consequently be regained. On this level of theorising we can talk about whether there is such a thing as inherent equal human dignity or there isn't, this

is an issue of ethics and philosophy. Natural law, universality arguments are by definition transnational, transcendental and atemporal, as such they are irrelevant to historically determined linguistic usage such as the application of the term Eastern Europe. On this abstract level therefore we cannot argue about regaining because by definition what is inherent it cannot be taken away.

how does dignity work

We often feel that our dignity is violated that it is not being recognised and a declaration of its existence will not make us feel that we indeed have it. In order to be able to talk about the practical phenomenon of the experience of dignity we have to deal with it as a quality. Dignity as a quality can be viewed as lacking altogether in self-destructive people or overtly present in others. Still we can only talk about losing, maintaining or regaining our dignity on a qualitative level.

We all have a sense and an idea of our own worth. When our sense and idea of worth is not being recognised we can feel all sorts of negative emotions humiliation, shame, anger etc. We feel that because the other treats us based on her idea of our worth, which might not match ours. When ideas of worth do not match we have lack of recognition and lack of mutual respect and in some situations we feel that our dignity is taken away or that we are treated as if we didn't have dignity.

On the descriptive level we do not all automatically have dignity but we constantly recreate and strive to maintain it in face of others. We all have an idea about our own worth and we expect that worth to be recognised by others. Some people feel that they worth should be recognized and acknowledged by others but do not apply the same methodology to themselves as agents. Dignity does not exist in isolation only via other human beings, it is a dormant idea in ourselves which we constantly modify – based on experience, opinions – and we adjust our behaviour, this is a process which goes on all the time, we always negotiate our worth and the worth of others. Dignity, to my mind, is a state of mind about humanness. It is not a stage we can achieve once off and then enjoy for the rest of our lives, it is a process. We have to constantly remind ourselves that we are human.

When dignity is seen as an ideal, than sooner or later there will have been - as there already are - individuals and/or groups which overtake the expression and claim to have achieved the ideal and as such demand to be followed. In the human rights framework human dignity is not an ideal, it was declared precisely to prevent people from being able to claim to be ideal, but something what is inherent to all people, therefore we would already all be ideal and if an ideal is achieved it ceases to be an ideal.

regaining dignity in Europe

The current debate on human dignity within the framework of human rights is often based on the UDHR which was written and signed in Europe. I think it was a very unlucky decision to consider it universal by declaration because it raises many critical approaches globally. Bottom line is, we should try and stick to it at least in the EU. It is therefore self-defeating to subdivide Europe into more or less worthy areas. Based on the ongoing situation in the EU we can perhaps say that the South of Europe has become the new East. With the economic situation in the south of Europe we find ourselves degrading the people in the Mediterranean to lazy coffee drinkers. This just shows that public opinion is very easily influenced by vague and reactionary responses and oversimplified binary oppositions.

Dignity in human rights conceptualisations is about evaluation of worth along horizontal axis but we can talk about some people claiming to have more worth due to the part of Europe they come from. In the dignity conceptualisation, negotiation of worth is a constant process. And as I have said before in the dignity theory I am developing we all have our idea and sense of worth.

Our idea of worth is based on our idea of our identity. Identity is a complex concept but I just want to touch upon it in order to clarify the dignity argument. Some people strongly identify with the geographical area they were born in or the area they live in, they assign it value systems and they cling to them and this in itself is harmless. But we tend to forget that the physical world, places carry only the value we attach to it.

We cling to the ideas and attached value systems because they are appealing to us. Humans rarely resist self-aggrandisement. We easily fall into traps of group or category identity, this is precisely what some political ideologies do (DuPreez 1980,5). The idea of identity traps can be extended to politicised ideologies as well. ...

One can be lured into identity traps because ideas of worth are like an amorphous matter which we constantly adjust. Psychologist Carol S. Dweck refers to this process as “contingent self worth” (1999) in her study. Therefore our idea of worth is happily adjusted to suitability and some of us tend to remain in a group which is stronger or has a better reputation.

As far as the worth of Eastern Europe is concerned, countries cannot have dignity, only people can. People in Eastern Europe have equal human dignity but not necessarily the same amount of dignity, they sometimes tend to regards themselves as less worthy not as humans but as citizens of the country we hold passports of and Europe as such.

Europe and the EU is often criticised more negatively than positively yet each country within the EU has had its share of wars, conflict and unrest. All countries in the EU are democratic and models for mutual coexistence are being developed. In the EU context Eastern Europe is more of a romantic concept than a concept with descriptive

power. All EU countries share more or less similar worries yet some have higher standards of living and some are more desirable than others.

It is a well known claim that a country needs good advertising in order to sell itself. Making an image of itself a presentation of self has become “an inordinately elaborate matter of facade construction” (Boli and Elliott 2008). Branding or nation branding is something what countries do in order to make themselves known, to popularize themselves motivated by economic benefits usually, since a good reputation leads to growth in tourism and investments, branding is even considered a form of soft power. But good branding costs a lot of money. Can we truly judge a country based on its branding? Perhaps we should not but we do and Eastern European countries simply cannot afford it.

Suddenly the highflying ideas of human dignity and dignity and the reality of a seemingly totally divided Europe hits us. And regaining dignity on a national level becomes a question of money. As such than countries with better branding are more appealing and we have just reduced an ethical question to money. Are the countries with the highest branding also the most loved or trusted? That is perhaps another matter.

The UDHR declared the existence of human dignity, from a declaration normative cannot be drawn. The preamble is “determined” to “reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person”. Dignity therefore perhaps is a matter of faith and it exists only if we believe in it. Regaining dignity therefore can be seen as a regaining of faith in humanity and that surely is a common goal.

conclusion

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