

# SELF-SUFFICIENT ENTITIES INHERITING A MULTIPLE CULTURAL CODE

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## ABSTRACT

This is a review of Victor Neumann's book *The Temptation of Homo Europaeus: An Intellectual History of Central and Southeastern Europe*, translated by Dana Miu and Neil Titman, second, updated edition published by Scala Publishers London in 2020. Victor Neumann is a historian and professor at the West University of Timisoara. His second edition of *Homo Europaeus* has been reviewed by numerous publications on the cultural and intellectual history of Central and Southeastern Europe. My perspective is that of a phenomenologist and specialist in French and Spanish cultures. As such, the book left a special impression on me: Neumann does not limit himself to the mentioned areas of Europe, but understands the continent in its entirety, that is, 'West' and 'East' as a whole.

**Keywords:** Europe, Central and Southeastern Europe, cultural and intellectual history

In speaking of *Homo Europaeus's* cultural temptation, I have considered the European continent as a single spiritual entity involving the participation of East and West, of both the Balkan Greek Orthodox and the Western worlds and the two halves of the Roman Empire, alongside the contribution of the North, which the Empire never succeeded in mastering and later became the territory of the Reformation ... for the Central and Eastern region the new European Man was always, after Boccaccio in Italy, Rabelais in France and Shakespeare in England, a symbol of civilisation, of spiritual heights (Neumann, 2020, p.18).

On the other hand, Europe is understood as a 'unity in diversity', an amalgam of civilised styles connected by a common vision of life. Neumann summarises the deep impulse of *Homo Europaeus* as follows: 'He was and still can be a faith ... a morality of individuals who have enlightened everywhere and always the path of access of many'. The author deals with the transition period from the Middle Ages to the modern and contemporary eras. Therefore, the chapters of the book are

dedicated to the individual themes and phases of change. What is meant by the concept of Homo Europaeus is addressed in Chapter I and deepened in the afterword, highlighting in particular the need for historical clarification. The book illustrates this with cultural-historical notions, such as center vs. periphery, modernity and collective identity, multiculturalism and interculturality. The historian often approaches the subject through interrogation, and in the case of Victor Neumann it refers to the intercultural perspective of the intellectual history of Central and Southeastern Europe:

*Analysing the Modern Era through the lens of multi- and interculturality offers a different perspective on social and intellectual history, since it allows us to conceptualise modernity on the basis of cultural transfers and the transnational meaning and regional identities (Neumann, 2020, p. 267).*

In doing so, the author distances himself from the national historiographies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, according to which history is a teleological process that aims to form the nation but ignores any other trends. On the other hand, Neumann does not want modernity to be understood as a symbol of global delimitation. Homo Europaeus in the modern version is the impetus for free thinking, the development of human skills and a sense of balance in the design of common goals. In other words, the European found his own way of being when the social and political framework conditions were outlined. In Central and Southeastern Europe there was no early and permanent centralisation of government as in Spain or France, hence the fact that many regions became ‘transit zones’, trade and craft nodes stimulating intellectual exchanges. The attraction for civilised conditions gave rise to a cultural infrastructure (monasteries, libraries, archives), often playing the role of ‘cultural corridors’ (Răzvan Theodorescu) facilitating the ‘transfer of information’ (Neumann, p. 263, 267). That is why the intercultural, cross-border perspective becomes the very theme of research. These regions are the prototype of a history of convergence (*histoire croisée*).

*The cities of Prague, Budapest, Bratislava, Novi Sad, Gorizia, Trieste, Krakow, Lemberg/Lviv, Timișoara/Temeswar and Cernăuți/Czernowitz evolved in modern, self-sufficient entities thanks to multilingualism and religious convergences between Catholic and Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic (the case of Greek Catholics), Jew and Christian, and Muslim and Christian. In other words, they became part of modern civilisation thanks to their multiple-coded cultural inheritance (Neumann, 2020, p. 264).*

Multiculturality in regions such as Bohemia, Silesia, Moravia, Slovenia, Banat, Transylvania and Bukovina has long been part of people's lives, generating guidelines, principles and social norms in which we identify the common sense of

European civilisation. Integration into a local political order and social structure through multilingual field of the frontier received a different meaning in the mentioned cities, that of lived mediation.

The political boundaries that have changed countless times over the centuries have done nothing to change that. According to Neumann, the semantic, multicultural and multi-denominational coexistence has produced 'hybrid identities' - a 'key concept' for defining European modernity. He contradicts the thesis of methodological nationalism, which gives priority to the search for a 'leading culture' supported by a majority. Victor Neumann exemplifies this concept by rethinking the past and the identity origins of the Balkan communities:

*[...] Southeastern European cities such as Bucharest, Belgrade, Sofia, Sarajevo and Thessaloniki defined themselves by the cohabitation by various religious communities and not only by their geographical position. They had rarely invoked the term Balkans in their self-definition, nor did they see themselves as an outpost of European Christianity or a defensive fortress impeding the advance of Ottoman civilisation. Instead, they constructed their identity by the conservation of traditions, long-term transitions from one historical era to another, and by experimentation and innovation (Neumann, 2020, p. 266).*

It was the merit of the House of Habsburg, the Austrian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in preserving regional identities with their own traditions and peculiarities. On many occasions, Neumann explains the interaction between state-political and bureaucratic innovations and respect for the assertion of regional communities. The continuity of this relationship has given rise to a culture of coexistence.

*Undoubtedly, the modernity of these places was due, on the one hand, to the reception of Western ideas and, on the other, to the conception of a different kind of statehood than that of Western Europe. Multiculturalism was a reality in Central and Eastern Europe, not a utopia or myth devised by the Habsburgs. It was grounded in historical realities and closely tied to a 'heterogeneity of the cultures' specific to these areas (Neumann, 2020, p. 268).*

Neumann explains that the Enlightenment ideas were received in the region without abandoning their own perspective on life, the new and the traditional interfering. The phenomenon took place through the open-minded Viennese authorities, and through the Catholic Church's integration into government programs. For a long time, such transfer of Western ideas was not accepted by Enlightenment scholars, who argued that Eastern Europe began the transition to modernity only in the 19th century, which explains why its role could be neglected in terms of the history of ideas. One more thing: the polarising notion of center

versus periphery was combined by the Western public with the uncontrolled impression of cultural superiority, then being 'exported' on a large scale to Central and Southeastern Europe. According to Neumann, the imagined meaning of the notion of the Balkans does not reflect reality, but rather serves the West's cultural superiority complex:

*Used by politicians and mass-media-grounded 'industry of consciousness', these archetypes not only function as clues towards the falsification of realities, but also reveal the manner in which the Balkan region has been exploited as an object of dominating cultures' dialogues about themselves. The result was that societies, but especially the elites in this region of Europe, were and are forced to learn not only the vocabulary of the West, but also the stereotypes assimilated by it (Neumann, 2020, p. 261).*

It recalls a similar thesis that Spain did not integrate into the Enlightenment, that it did not belong to modern Europe, the meaning of the Enlightenment being changed as soon as it did not copy French atheistic materialism. The assertion that Spain ignored the Enlightenment is linked to the names of representative contemporary researchers such as Werner Krauss. Authors including Jovellanos, Cabarrús, Campomanes, Capmany, Aranda, Floridablanca and Feijóo now represent the well-researched Spanish Enlightenment milieu of the 18th century. However, the comparison contributes to highlighting the extraordinary culture of Central and Southeastern Europe, opposed to religious dogmatism, open to immigrants, multilingualism and multiculturalism. The geographical space between Vienna and Constantinople is remarkable for its hybrid identities, describing a culture of inclusion in contrast to the Spanish culture of exclusion, which has long been obsessed with the so-called 'purity of blood'. Although the Byzantine Empire, as a rigid theocracy, had for centuries a great influence in Central and Southeastern Europe, the area was shaped by a multitude of spiritual currents: Greek Orthodoxy (the sanctification of earthly life in the sense of John's theology as opposed to Pauline theology from Catholicism and Protestantism); Protestantism; the Ottoman Empire (moderate use of cultural conditions and the slow development of capitalist economic structures); and Judaism (with intellectual, diplomatic, economic, social and religious activities). In conclusion, such comparisons can help to identify the different styles of Europeanisation.

According to Neumann, in Central and Southeastern Europe there were different local communities, some regions becoming a particular space of emotional resonance and the social and cultural-behavioral model. The aspiration for civilisational progress in the sense of the modern age has taken a special form in the regions belonging to the House of Habsburg and its institutional successors. Political dominance in association with a properly trained Catholic Church was

able to strike a balance between preserving the diversity of traditions and modernising the organisational structure of the empire. The education-oriented middle classes strived - together with the elite formed in the spirit of the *Aufklärung* - to transform society, provoking competition. This did not lead to a revolutionary escalation as in France. Enlightenment perspectives have found their expression in government political reforms, especially in the Josephinist current of ideas. Therefore, Neumann contradicts the widespread assumption in research that the civilising processes of the modern age can only be understood through temporality. He criticises the concept of temporality formulated by Reinhart Koselleck, namely the idea of the constant and similar spread of the Enlightenment throughout Europe, leveling the differences and social contradictions.

For Central and Southeastern Europe, space must first be considered as an explanatory category because its specific feature of civilisation has generated its own modernisation. From the perspective of Western atheist labeling, the area in question may seem like an 'underdeveloped' modernity. The inadequacy of this view is illustrated by Neumann's reference to nineteenth-century Russian great intellectuals like Feodor Dostoevsky. The book concludes with a consideration of the destructive consequences of the progress of romantic-nationalist thought in Central and Southeastern Europe. The ideology of ethnic self-assertion disintegrated multicultural communities, leading to regional wars and then to World War I. With the historic reconstruction of multilingual, multicultural and multiconfessional regions, Neumann hopes for a Europe in which citizens with multiple identities will strengthen civil society, ensuring democratic balance: 'Europe can be seen with great benefit for the project of its unification as soon as its multiple identities are admitted'.

## References

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