

# Book Forum on Hans Kundnani's *Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project*

STEFAN AUER	The University of Hong Kong, SAR, China
E-MAIL	stefauer@hku.hk
ORCID	<a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2722-3090">https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2722-3090</a>
PAVEL BARŠA	Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic
E-MAIL	pavel.barsa@ff.cuni.cz
ORCID	<a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9781-0354">https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9781-0354</a>
AGNES GAGYI	University of Gothenburg, Sweden
E-MAIL	agnes.gagy@gu.se
ORCID	<a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8124-4530">https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8124-4530</a>
HANS KUNDNANI	New York University, United States
E-MAIL	hk4134@nyu.edu
ABSTRACT	<p>This book forum discusses Hans Kundnani's pivotal book on "Eurowhiteness" and the role of race in the EU integration project. It includes three reactions from Stefan Auer, Pavel Barša, and Agnes Gagy, along with Kundnani's response. <i>Eurowhiteness</i> skillfully reveals what has been obscured by the European Union as a vehicle of "imperial amnesia". The three reactions and the author's response continue a polemical discussion on this imperial amnesia, as viewed through different intellectual traditions and regions, including Central and Eastern Europe and anti-colonial perspectives. As a result, the forum uses the book to either deepen the debate on the EU's civilizationism with new perspectives or expand the <i>Eurowhiteness</i> narrative with new geo-historical contexts and connections. Issues of Russian imperialism in Ukraine, the Israeli war in Gaza, and the economic dimensions of European coloniality are brought to the foreground, particularly when viewed through the imagination and reality of Central (and Eastern) Europe.</p>
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# Editorial

DANIEL ŠITERA

Hans Kundnani <sup>(2023)</sup> has written an excellent book. His *Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project* brings two important contributions to the debate on the EU and whiteness, the one being a style and the other being a social experiment. First, the book provides a bridge from an increasingly prominent but still academic debate on the whiteness in and of Europe to broader non-academic audiences. The critique of (Euro)whiteness and racism has been already developed and applied in the academic debate. However, Kundnani's accessible grasp and insightful elaboration of these discussions deliver the argument to wider audiences beyond university classrooms and academic conferences. Second, the book and its well-received status among the "European mainstream" are also a social experiment. Kundnani admits in the biographical introduction that he himself used to be a naïve "pro-European" who had apparently moved to the margins of this mainstream in search of becoming its intellectual *enfant terrible*. There is thus a grain of truth in that his book is a product of "Anglo-American hegemony" <sup>(BEJAN 2024)</sup> or "anti-imperialism of the centre" <sup>(LACZÓ 2024)</sup>. The fact that this centre is at least partially ready to acknowledge and even appreciate Kundnani's critique of Europe's civilizational turn shows a new *zeitgeist*. The times are changing as the mainstream crumbles and the margins are ready to speak inside and outside of Europe, for better or worse.

This forum is also an experiment on or from Europe's (semi)margins. It consists of three reactions by Stefan Auer, Pavel Barša, and Agnes Gagyí, as well as of Kundnani's response. The recent forum in the CEU Review of Books <sup>(BEJAN 2024; LACZÓ 2024; KUNDNANI 2024A)</sup> manifested that the Central and East European reception of Kundnani's grasp of the region might easily put him into the category of *Westspaining*. Even though Kundnani himself is using a decolonial perspective, this forum might ironically encounter a critique of reproducing "*epistemic imperialism*" <sup>(HENDL ET AL. 2024)</sup> from the very same perspective, simply because it gives space to a book written by a West-born and -based and left-leaning author. Indeed, Kundnani responded to his Central and Eastern European critics by pointing to the lure of "*innocence*" in the region <sup>(KUNDNANI 2024A)</sup>. It is worth it to take the risk.

This lure of “*innocence*” (SLAČÁLEK 2016: 34, 38) is not new in this region and has problematized applying anti-colonial (postcolonial or decolonial, broadly speaking) perspectives there. Thanks to Auer, Barša, and Gagyi’s contributions, such forum touches on both the region of Central Europe or Central and Eastern Europe, and this anti-colonial intellectual traditions.

Kundnani’s Eurowhiteness skillfully makes us see again what has been unseen by the EU as a vehicle of Europe’s “*imperial amnesia*” (p. 95). The three reactions continue in this mission through either a polemical critiquing of the book or by using it to deepen or broaden its interpretation of the place of Central (and Eastern) Europe in Europe’s imperial amnesia. Auer challenges Kundnani by pointing out that he might both idealize the “*non-West*” and overestimate the internal sources of the EU’s defensive civilizationism, particularly by underestimating the very real “*Russian imperial amnesia*”. Auer brings in the Central and East European experience as a reminder of Russia’s imperial ambitions in Ukraine and beyond. Barša continues in discussing this experience by pointing to Central and Eastern Europe’s very own “*reductive memory*”. Among other things, this reductive memory explains why Czech elites can openly support the Western complicity in the Israeli war in Gaza. Finally, Gagyi challenges Kundnani’s interpretation by seeing it as a “*coloniality without capitalism*” which neglects the capitalist dimension of European internal and external coloniality. According to her, Kundnani thus fails to take the full implications of the anti-colonial intellectual traditions for his own critique on paper and for the EU in practice. In the concluding part, Kundnani polemically responds to all three reactions and the issues raised.

# The Empire That Never Was: The European Project and Its Limitations

STEFAN AUER

The West is not the best. But the fact that the West has thought of itself as being the best is a liability that it seems unable to overcome. Europe is particularly bad in this respect, Hans Kundnani argues. The more Europe congratulates itself on leaving its dark legacies behind, the more it perpetuates past mistakes, the biggest one being a racialised ordering of the world in which ‘whites’ are superior and must guide those who are deemed less accomplished. The West is thus destined to lead the rest; that is its historical mission. The red thread that runs through *“the history of the idea of Europe from ancient Greece to World War II”*, in Kundnani’s succinct historical survey, *“is a sense of superiority and a concomitant impulse to ‘civilise’ the rest of the world, which evolved from a religious mission in the medieval period to a rationalist, racialised mission in the modern period”* (p. 42). So far, so good. The truly controversial claim Kundnani advances, however, is that the postwar European project does not represent a radically new departure from this awful past, but its logical continuation. Rather than creating a better world, he argues, the EU *“had become a vehicle for imperial amnesia”* (p. 95) enabling Europeans to ignore their dark legacies. Thus “pro-Europeans” who are in favour of European integration display a neo-colonial mindset when they predict that Europe will *“run the twenty-first century”* (LEONARD 2005). Imagining Europe as *“the laboratory of the future”* and a model for the world is nothing more than *“a new, somewhat technocratic version of the old idea of Europeanising the world”* (p. 97). And the idea that the European Union represents a new kind of power, a *“civilian power”* (p. 120) that would *“civilise’ international politics”* (p. 124), has blinded EU proponents to seeing Europe’s many past and current failings.

*Eurowhiteness* is a truly iconoclastic study that challenges well-entrenched misconceptions about EU origins and the purpose of the European project. Kundnani is in an excellent position to mount his critique. As he explains in the introduction, more than a decade ago, when working at the European Council on Foreign Relations, he too considered himself

a “pro-European”, assuming “*that the EU was a force for good, both internally within Europe and in the world beyond*” (p. 2). However, the more the author learned about the EU the less he liked it, defying the common assumption that the problems with growing euroscepticism can be addressed by spreading better knowledge about this noble political project. Instead, what we appear to observe is the rise of “*Eurodisappointment*” (MARKOWSKI – ZAGÓRSKI 2023; PAVONE 2024). Thus, Kundnani’s is a major contribution to the growing number of studies making “*the left case against the EU*” (LAPAVITSAS 2019). But while the likes of Chris Bickerton (2016), Costas Lapavitsas (2019), Claus Offe (2015), or Wolfgang Streeck (2021) tend to focus on the EU’s failure to live up to its promise of building a social Europe, Kundnani’s critique is in many ways more fundamental as it raises questions about the key aims of European integration.

### THE WEST AND ITS WESTERN CRITICS

EU proponents mistake Europe for the world and assume that they are worldly simply by virtue of being European. Not so, argues Kundnani, pointing out that the European project should be thought of “*as being analogous to nationalism*” (p. 15), just at a bigger, regional level. And like nationalism, such an expression of regionalism can be good, or bad, progressive, or reactionary. There is no second guessing where Kundnani locates the EU we currently have. It is basically racist, aiming at defending Europe’s privileged position in the world, rather than pursuing the goals of global justice it proudly claims to represent. While in its early stages the project aimed to protect the imperial possessions of its founding members, such as France and Belgium, today it claims to protect “*the European way of life*”. Both are defensive postures towards the outside world, which ought to be dominated, or if that’s no longer possible, against which Europeans need to be protected. Thus, the guiding principle developed already in the interwar period was that “*Europeans must unite in order to recover their dominant position in the world or at least prevent their further decline*” (p. 63).

Insular in their outlook, “pro-Europeans” fail to see the lasting impact of these legacies, considering instead Brexit with its emphasis on “*Global Britain*” as a neo-imperial project. This is because “*the colonial origins of the EU*” – what Kundnani calls its original sin – “*have been written out of the narrative of European integration*” (p. 75). In a nuanced discussion

of the varieties of motives that led to Britain's departure from the EU, Kundnani convincingly demonstrates that for many ethnic minority voters, their support for Brexit wasn't "*an expression of racism but its opposite – a rejection of a bloc that they saw as racist*" (p. 154). And while Kundnani is willing to sketch his vision for a better, post-Brexit Britain, one that would be more at ease with its multicultural and multiracial composition and even more open to newcomers from the outside world, his vision for a better Europe remains sketchy. This is partly because a more thorough engagement with Europe's imperial histories would have centrifugal effects, he argues, pulling the nations of Europe apart from each other rather than strengthening their unity.

And yet, Europe's imperial past – including its nasty, violent excesses – is also a common inheritance. Kundnani traces it back to the Enlightenment. As he puts it, "*the Enlightenment was not a separate intellectual tradition, unrelated to the history of European colonialism from which the idea of whiteness emerged. Rather, the two went together. The colonial project was bound up with precisely the same Enlightenment thought that 'pro-Europeans' claim differentiates the EU from pre-World War II versions of European identity*" (p. 53).

To be sure, Kundnani does not want to suggest that there is nothing valuable to be found in the Enlightenment, but as he goes on demolishing its key contributors, it is not clear what is left that he would subscribe to. For example, Immanuel Kant is rightly criticised for his lecture "*Von den verschiedenen Racen der Menschen*" (On the Different Races of Human Beings), but I do not see how this, per se, invalidates his cosmopolitan ideals. As Kundnani also acknowledges, there were different strands of the Enlightenment and some of them undoubtedly enabled human progress. In other words, the Enlightenment also contained the ideals which helped Europe to overcome its own limitations. Maybe this was not done as successfully and comprehensively as "pro-Europeans" would have us believe, but there surely has been some progress in relation to racism, for example. Similarly, slavery and colonialism were indeed all too often pursued in the name of the Enlightenment, but thinkers and politicians doing so betrayed the enlightened ideals of equality and freedom rather than acting on them. Thus, when Kant sought to advance racist ideas, he betrayed Kantian ideals, exposing his personal limitations rather than the inherent wickedness of his political and philosophical project. By contrast, when

contemporary ideologues of Vladimir Putin's Russia, such as Alexander Dugin, argue that Russians should rule over Ukrainians and enforce that rule by violent means (AUER 2015), they live up to their chauvinistic ideals, which seek to unmake Europe as a cosmopolitan project.

Ironically, Kundnani's radical critique of the West is very western. He is right to caution against "*the tendency to simplistically invoke the Enlightenment without recognising its problematic aspects*", but that criticism reflects rather than challenges its key legacy. The West is all about critical self-reflection. Modernity's discontents were there from the very beginning. It is not accidental that one of the programmatic texts that came to define the movement was Kant's attempt to answer the question "*What is the Enlightenment?*". Thus, recognizing problematic aspects of the Western tradition and its vulnerabilities has strong roots in the western canon. Thinkers as different as Edmund Burke, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida criticized – from their vastly different viewpoints – the excessive confidence of the Enlightenment, which is the source of Europe's greatness and of its awfulness. That is, in fact, the "*Dialectic of the Enlightenment*" as the 20th century diagnosticians of Europe's disastrous path to modernity argued – for example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer "*showed how civilisation and barbarism went together*" (p. 77). In other words, Kundnani is right to cite the Frankfurt School and Hannah Arendt in support of his argument, but he could also have cited a number of major thinkers before and after this school: from Burke in the eighteenth century to Wolfgang Streeck (2021) and Perry Anderson (2021) today. Thus, Kundnani's critical position might be rare within the world of think tanks, but within broader academic debates in history, cultural studies and even political science, the idea that the West is not the best is very much the new orthodoxy.

## AN IDEALIZED NON-WEST?

All the same, I have a great deal of sympathy for Kundnani's unsparing attack on "pro-Europeans", including those who have shaped academic debates within the peculiar sub-discipline of EU studies. The "[p]ro-integration bias in mainstream" EU studies (LECONTE 2015) led to numerous distortions, constraining the free debate on the nature of the European project. Too many scholars were co-opted as the EU's disciples, embracing its bold (if often vaguely articulated) ambitions. As Joseph Weiler put it, the

EU's messianic vision *"has animated generations of European idealists, where the ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe, with peace and prosperity as icing on the cake, constitutes the beckoning promised land"* (WEILER 2011). This needs closer examination, particularly as Europe appears to be moving further from its self-proclaimed values. Kundnani is thus to be commended for exposing the EU's many hypocrisies. And he is right to be skeptical about the most recent attempt to turn the EU into a *"war project"* in response to the Russian aggression while *"many pro-Europeans are idealising its history as a 'peace project'"* (KUNDNANI 2024B).

And yet, Kundnani may well be guilty of idealizing the rest of the world. For example, isn't the very description of thinkers as being *"from the anti-imperialist and black radical traditions"* undermining Europe's universalist aspirations rather than representing *"a step towards developing a genuinely universal universalism"* (p. 58)? And while Central Europeans are rightly criticized for their past imperial fantasies – with *"intellectuals in Czechoslovakia and Poland"* in the interwar period demanding that their nations *"be given extra-European colonies of their own"* (p. 115) – the Russian past and present colonial projects tend to be underplayed, with the author repeatedly describing *"the perception of threats from a revisionist Russia"* (p. 138, emphasis added). Over the last decade or so, Europe didn't just become *"more defensive as it came to see itself as being surrounded by threats"* (p. 125, emphasis added); it has been threatened from both within and without. Thus, Emmanuel Macron's idea of *"a Europe that protects"* shouldn't be dismissed lightly (p. 138). One does not need to subscribe to Thomas Hobbes' views to accept the idea that a political regime that proves unable to protect its citizens loses its legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> The problem, in my view, is not that the European project *"was, always, also about power"* (p. 64), but rather how and to what purpose this power was deployed. The more EU leaders talk about *"a Europe that protects"* while proving unable to deliver on that promise, the more they expose their weakness. Internally as well as in relation to its Eastern neighbors, particularly Ukraine, the EU has consistently overpromised and underdelivered (SCICLUNA – AUER 2023).

## CENTRAL EUROPE AND RUSSIA

Where does this leave the nations of Central Europe? Not without reason they see themselves as victims of another kind of European imperialism, as



acknowledged by Kundnani (p. 173) – Russian imperialism. This doesn't excuse Central Europeans' amnesia about their past failings, let alone their present racist attitudes towards foreigners; Kundnani is right on this. Yet, the ultimate irony is that Russia itself sees itself as a major victim of western imperialism – a posture that seems to resonate in the developing world. Russian anti-imperialist rhetoric also finds supporters amongst the left-wing forces across Europe, including the former youth communist leader Robert Fico, who is (once again) Slovakia's prime minister. In fact, Russia has repeatedly justified its aggression against Ukraine as a defensive war against the West. That the Russian regime resorts to racist propaganda directed against Ukrainians – who are at times seen as Slavic brothers and at other times seen as a nation of renegades who should be exterminated – doesn't quite fit in this story. At any rate, it is the Russian imperial amnesia that is of primary concern to many people in Central and Eastern Europe right now. This takes us back to the demise of communism in Europe in 1989. It was first the Soviet empire that collapsed in 1989, followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Kundnani is right to ask, "*what kind of imagined Europe[did] central and eastern Europeans who joined the EU in 2004 [think] they were becoming part of – and in what sense [was it] a 'return' to something they had previously been part of?*" (p. 114).

True, whatever hopes and expectations the people in the new member states might have had both about their political regimes *after* communism and about their place in Europe were bound to lead to disappointments. The Europe that the nations of Central and Eastern Europe sought to return to – one in which they would become prosperous and well-governed virtually overnight – never existed. But one of the key aspirations of the 1989 revolutions, to become free from the Soviet (and also Russian) tutelage, was largely realized. What was for Putin Europe's greatest geopolitical catastrophe, represented a moment of national liberation for the countries of Central Europe. Yet, suggesting that these "*were also nationalist revolutions whose aim was to create not just democratic but also ethnically homogenous nation states*" (p. 114), as Kundnani does, citing Branko Milanovic, goes a bit too far. Notwithstanding numerous instances of nationalist mobilization in the region, no major political party advocated ethnic cleansing (with the notable exception of the nations in former Yugoslavia).

In many ways, 1989 could be seen as the first step towards the reversal of what Milan Kundera famously described as "The Tragedy of Central Europe".

And as Kundnani also discusses, Kundera's was a civilizational project openly directed against Russia (cf. AUER 2023). Central Europe did not merely belong to the European civilization, but in Kundera's view, it was its embodiment. "By returning to Europe", Kundnani summarizes, "central Europeans would save it from itself" (p. 116). Is this what happened though? Undermining my own past arguments in support of Ukraine, I wonder whether *Eurowhiteness* may end up being vindicated in relation to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, on which European political elites are divided more than Kundnani acknowledges. While the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2024) continues to promise that the EU "stands firmly by Ukraine, financially, economically, militarily, and most of all, morally, until [Ukraine] is finally free", the support from the individual member states was never quite that firm and appears to be waning further. This, alongside the constraints of the US and the UK military support for Ukraine, has resulted in a situation in which Ukraine receives sufficient support to continue fighting (at least at the time of writing), but without a realistic chance of repelling the invader. The result is a protracted war of attrition with enormous (and rising) human and material costs. But this is hardly the result of Europe's imperial hubris, but rather of its relative impotence in the face of a revanchist Russia.

Whether and how this constellation could have been prevented will be debated by historians and political scientists for decades to come. Was Europe's success in reversing the Russian/Soviet imperial ambitions in 1989–91 a case of a pyrrhic victory? Were our celebrations back then premature? If the (re-)integration of Central Europe occurred at the expense of the countries further to the East (not just Russia, but also Ukraine and Belarus), then the gains may well end up being short-lived. As the likelihood of defeating, or at least constraining Russian imperial ambitions appears to be diminishing, the European project is threatened not merely by its internal contradictions (masterfully exposed by Kundnani), but also by the militant Russian revanchism that does not tolerate self-doubt. Its bold rhetoric notwithstanding, the EU is far from becoming an empire, let alone a credible "war project". It remains an in-between polity permanently stuck between the ambition to become a state-like actor with quasi-imperial ambitions – "a Europe that protects" – and the reality of its relative impotence (AUER 2024). In order to overcome this, the European Union will require more than just coming to terms with its dark legacies. It will need to redefine its purpose commensurately with its abilities.

# Post-Communist Central Europe and Eurowhiteness: Comments on Hans Kundnani

PAVEL BARŠA

Hans Kundnani's book has opened a debate that had been long overdue. Since I agree with the main thrust of his argument, my task is modest. Here I develop or modify some of his points pertaining to Central Europe: a sub-region of the EU that, as Kundnani rightly observes, strengthened the ethnic/cultural pole of the EU self-understanding in the 2000s and has become a vanguard of its "civilizational turn" since the refugee crisis in the mid-2010s. As I and Ondřej Slačálek (BARŠA – SLAČÁLEK, IN PRINT) have tried to show, post-communist Central Europe (encompassing the so-called Visegrad countries) can be conceived as a regional "imagined community" of its own, albeit one with blurred boundaries and no established political structure. We have applied Rogers Brubaker's (1996) insight that the nation can be conceived as a "*contingent event*" – the result of an interplay between historical circumstances and actors using them as an opportunity to mobilize and/or create a certain collective identity on behalf of which they raise their claims.

The time span of Central Europe as it was imagined and acted upon by significant segments of cultural and political elites in Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and Bratislava stretched over the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even if it began to take shape in the discourses of its important spokespersons already in the 1970s and 1980s, its political contours emerged only in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. It began to wane when the post-Cold War era, which began to unravel in the 2010s, was given the final death blow by Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Israel's war in Gaza in 2023. My hunch is that those two wars have ushered in a new period in which the boundaries of imagined collective identities that were drawn in the 1980s and 1990s are being re-drawn or replaced by others. Thus, Central Europe as we have known it in the last 40 years

or so is losing its political relevance and becoming a thing of the past. It played a significant role, however, in the transformation of the EU which Kundnani analyzes in his book.

## A KIDNAPPED WEST

One of the key intellectuals among the émigrés and dissidents participating in the construction of this Central Europe was Milan Kundera <sup>(1983/2023)</sup>. Kundnani rightly identifies his *Tragedy of Central Europe* as a key work that set some of the parameters for the discourses of a “return to Europe” during the 1989 revolutions. His essay is the perfect starting point for our subject-matter precisely because Kundera carried out in it the paradigmatic shift from the ideological argument against Soviet socialism to the thesis of the civilizational gap between the Russian empire and Central Europe, which became its political (semi)periphery after WWII.

This was a different kind of argument than a Christian Democratic defense of Europe against the atheistic USSR in the first years of the Cold War. Far from being civilizationist, as Kundnani claims, the latter argument only updated the rejection of liberal and socialist secularism which characterized conservatism since its birth in the wake of the French Revolution. The only, albeit substantial, innovation was the reconciliation of Christianity with democracy that drew on Jacques Maritain’s democratic turn in the 1940s. In all other respects, Christian democrats followed in the footsteps of their predecessors from the 19th century. If this was a *conflation* of the ideological dimension and the civilizational dimension, then we would have to conceive the very conservative ideology as such a conflation. In contrast to the Western Christian Democrats of the 1950s, Kundera – following in the footsteps of some authors of the previous generation such as Czesław Miłosz <sup>(1959/2002)</sup>, Sándor Márai <sup>(POSTHUMOUSLY 2013/2018)</sup> or István Bibó <sup>(1946/2015)</sup> – did not conceive the tension between Central Europe and the USSR in the 1980s primarily as a struggle of two projects for *the future* – one grounded in religion, the other in atheism – but, rather, as stemming from the incompatibility of their respective cultures which they inherited from *the past*.

Even if we gave the benefit of a doubt to Kundnani’s “conflationist” thesis with regard to Western Europe, the center of gravity of both official

and unofficial discourses of the first 25 years behind the Iron Curtain after WWII lay in the ideological arguments. Only after the last big attempts at democratic reforms of Soviet and Yugoslav socialism at the end of the 1960s had failed, an ideological void opened in which the political projects invoking universal values could be replaced by those referring to particular regional traditions. This culturalist turn ran in parallel to the rise of politics of identity in the Western Left after the last wave of utopian hopes at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s had subsided and the neo-liberal ideology gained the hegemonic position in the socio-economic realm. In the same period, Central European dissidents at home and Central European émigrés in the West began to complement the universalist, i.e., human rights-based, criticism of the late Soviet regimes with particularist recollections of the pre-Soviet and even pre-WWI periods as times of a flowering Central European culture that was subsequently destroyed by a(n) (half-)Asiatic empire.

The political biography of Kundera himself was a perfect case in point of this replacement. He was one of the leading communist intellectuals of the Prague Spring. After his hopes for “socialism with a human face” had been crushed by the armies of the Warsaw Pact and the subsequent “normalization”, he turned his gaze fondly to the Habsburg *fin de siècle* culture. The crux of his case for Central Europe in his essay from 1983 is a Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations” *avant la lettre*. There was one substantial difference between him and Huntington, however. Whereas the American political scientist formulated his thesis as a response to the new situation brought about by the end of the Cold War, Kundera translated its very fault lines in Europe into civilizational terms.

His essay became one of the sources of the “return to Europe” discourses of the early 1990s. The “kidnapped” sub-region of Europe was “returning” to it *both* as a repository of true European culture that had been already diluted in the West by mass media and commercialization, and as a bulwark not only against Russia’s barbaric imperialism but also against the “Munich-like” tendency of Western Europe to appease it. One example of such an appeasement was precisely its abandonment of Central Europe, as pointed out by Kundera in his essay. The lesson the new post-communist elites drew from this abandonment was that the security of Central Europe had to be guaranteed by the US, which they – unlike Kundera – included

in “the West”. They did not make any effort to account for the concerns and perspectives of the non-European and non-Western parts of the planet called “the Third World” (MARK ET AL. 2019). Thus, they reversed the official USSR position which claimed to defend it against Western imperialism. For Central Europeans this was a piece of Soviet propaganda with no real base. That is why they proudly embraced the Eurocentric identification of the world with the West. Hence Kundnani is right that their “return” was also a return to “Eurowhiteness” (p. 118).

For some intellectuals of my generation, it was true quite literally. Hence their bitter disappointment when they saw the multiracial populations of the Western cities which they imagined in their dreams as white. I recall meeting one of my classmates from my university studies in the early 1980s (who became a professor of Czech literature at one of the most prestigious Czech universities in the 1990s) in a London student hostel in the spring of 1991. He complained about the noisy Black students at the hostel and, on a more general level, expressed a disenchantment with the multicultural nature of London: he had spent all those years behind the Iron Curtain dreaming of a “good old England” only to find a London crowded with Africans and Asians.

## WITH WESTERN NATIONS AGAINST EMPIRES

I have already hinted at the major difference between Kundera and the post-communist elites of Central European countries. While he embraced an anti-Americanism which was widespread among the intellectuals of his adoptive homeland, France, and therefore explicitly limited the “West” to Europe, those elites were using the slogan of a “return to Europe” while having the West enlarged by the United States in mind. An important part of the new political common sense of the Central Europe of the 1990s was an uncritical Atlanticism in both the geopolitical and the civilizational sense.

The new post-communist elites saw the US not only as an indispensable guarantor of their newly won independence, but also as an example of a free and democratic society whose institutions they wanted to emulate. Even the center of the left post-communist intellectuals and politicians who were critical of the incompleteness, if not absence, of the welfare state in the US, did not doubt that it is part of one civilizational

whole with Western and Central Europe. Thus, the first milestone of the promised “return to Europe” of the Central European countries was not their EU accession, but their obtaining a membership in NATO in 1999. By that time the discourse of the “return to Europe” had already been complemented and, at times, even superseded by the identification with the “Euro-Atlantic Civilization”.

The enlargement of the West by a “New”, i.e. Central and Eastern European, “Europe” strengthened not only the “*imperial amnesia*” of “*Old Europe*” (Kundnani), in which the memory of empire was replaced by what Timothy Snyder calls the “*fable of the wise nation*” or “*the creation myth of the EU*” (SNYDER 2019). It also strengthened the self-flattering image of America, which Madeleine Albright, a daughter of Czechoslovak émigré diplomats and a US Secretary of State, framed as an “indispensable nation” – a force for good in the world and a challenger of all its evil empires. For Americans, it was much more pleasant to see their country in the mirror of the eyes of the Central European satellites than in the eyes of the countries in the south of their continent that spent one and a half centuries under their hegemony. Who would not prefer to be seen as a liberator rather than a master, a benevolent “nation” rather than an “empire”?

The latter image of the US and other Western nations was at cross-purposes with the version of history that prevailed in post-Communist Central Europe. Its cultural and political elites assumed that what mattered most in modern history had its center of gravity in the Global North, not the Global South. Non-Western peoples and parts of the world have had no significant place in the historical narratives of Central European nations. With the help of Snyder’s terminological dichotomy, we can say that at least since WWI they have depicted themselves as trying to get out of the hold of autocratic *empires* – at first, the Central Powers (Austria, Germany), and later on, the Third Reich and the USSR – with the help of democratic *nations* – Great Britain, France and the US. In the Czech case, this narrative took on a paradigmatic shape with the programmatic book *Světová revoluce* (World Revolution) – translated into English as *The Making of a State* – which was written by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1925/2004) as a founder of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. He presents all three of the above mentioned Western powers as bearers of higher humanitarian principles and democracy without mentioning the French and British

colonies or the Jim Crow laws in America. Thus, he implicitly identified humanity with the peoples of European stock.

### **THE REDUCTIVE MEMORY AND ITS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES**

Sixty years later, “world revolution” was replaced by the “Velvet Revolution”, and Masaryk by Havel as the founder of a new, that is, post-Communist Czechoslovakia. By that time the Russian and German autocratic empires in their later forms were remembered as two versions of totalitarianism while the Manichean frame – based on the invisibility of the crimes of democratic empires in the West – remained untouched. The erasure of one half of humankind from the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was all the easier in the post-communist period because, as mentioned above, Soviet discourses about Western imperialism and racism were dismissed as totalitarian lies.

The result of the prevalence of this reductive history of the last century in the Central European post-communist societies was that they remembered only crimes committed by Europeans against other Europeans (e.g. Jews, Poles, “kulaks”) but never those committed by them against non-Europeans (e.g. Blacks, Arabs, Asians). The latter crimes did not even have to be forgotten or suppressed since they have never even been registered as something important and relevant. If they were mentioned at all, it was always as something contingent and accidental having no significance for the proper understanding of Western history. Some malfeasance may have happened due to the imperfect human nature and moral failures of individual politicians, but this could not undermine the fundamental goodness and humanity of the West and its benevolent effort to bring its higher standards to the rest of humankind. If this civilizational mission has occasionally taken on an imperialist form, this amounted to a regrettable deviation from the history of Western nations, whose club the Central European nations wanted to join.

Russian imperialism, on the contrary, has, in their view, belonged to the very essence of Russia as much as German imperialism had belonged to the very essence of the pre-1945 Germany. Similarly to the dismantlement of Germany’s Central European empire in 1945, the present Euro-Asian



empire is to be dismantled in the near future if European security is to be ensured. The Central Europeans draw post-colonial lessons exclusively from the Global North. In their eyes, no such lessons can be drawn from the Global South since colonialism and racism are not attributes of the West they have joined.

Every major event of our times, either in Europe or elsewhere, is read through the prism of this reductive memory. Putin cannot but be another Hitler or Stalin and those who are soft on him cannot but be Munich-like appeasers or his agents. If, in the view of Polish and Czech elites, 24 February 2022 marked the entry into a new Cold War, they suppose that it has become the only relevant fault-line of global politics as, in their view, the only relevant fault-line in the second half of the last century was the conflict between the Soviet East and trans-Atlantic West while decolonization struggles amounted to its epiphenomena with no substance of their own. Hence, they cannot conceive the neutralist tendencies of a large part of the Global South with regard to the war in Ukraine otherwise than by considering them a result of Russian manipulation and propaganda. Since for them, the history of Western colonization does not exist, what else could cause the fact that the rest of the world does not see the situation in Ukraine the way they do – namely as a struggle between Good and Evil?

The same reductive memory projects itself on the Gaza war but with the opposite effect as far as the moral judgment is concerned. This time the crimes of a power that infringes international law by occupying foreign territory are made invisible while the crimes of the occupied are bearing the weight of the guilt for the suffering of the innocent on both sides of the conflict. Since October 7, 2023, the mainstream Czech media and politicians have faithfully parroted the official Israeli narrative about an attempt at a 2<sup>nd</sup> Holocaust.

As Central Europeans are unaware of the European colonization of the Middle East by the victorious powers of WWI, which laid down the framework of the success of the Zionist project, the only prism which they have at their disposal as a tool of deciphering the present Middle East conflict is the memory of WWII with the Holocaust at its center. Their identification of Hamas with the Nazis entails the association of the suffering of the Palestinian civilians of Gaza under Israeli (and American) bombs

with the suffering of the German civilians of Dresden and Hamburg under Allied bombs: both are seen as a terrible but legitimate price to be paid for ridding the world of an absolute Evil. Whereas the public opinion of “old Europe” with regard to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza is split due to the struggle between the memory of European antisemitism and the Holocaust, and the memory of European racism and colonization, the mainstream public opinion of the Central European “new Europe” is more or less unified: it stands fully behind Israel since the latter memory is missing.

### THE END OF CENTRAL EUROPE AS WE HAVE KNOWN IT

The fact that Germany and Austria have belonged, together with most of New Europe (with Slovenia being the major exception to the pattern), to the unconditional supporters of the Israeli war in Gaza, is usually explained by the special situation of those nations as inheritors of the guilt of the perpetrators of the Holocaust, which entails more responsive behavior towards the state which claims to represent its victims. What may look like a justified exception to moral universalism in the context of the remembrance of the European past functions as a zero-sum game in the context of the Middle Eastern present. There the German and Austrian philo-Semitism looks like the last refuge of white European anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism.

The German and Austrian disposition to give an incomparably higher status to the suffering of European, i.e., Jewish, victims of European violence than to that of its non-European victims rhymes nicely with the post-Communist ignorance of the latter. The refusal of Germans to acknowledge the genocide of Herero and Namu, as mentioned by Kundnani, is in line with the Central European idea of different moral scales that should be applied to the crimes against the members of Western civilization and those against its barbarian outsiders – be they African tribes, Germans fanaticized by Hitler or Palestinians fanaticized by Hamas.

Since the horrific Hamas attack of October 7, the German cultural and political establishment has used the “cancel culture” tactic to silence the voices of dissent against the official German position as manifestations of anti-Semitism. Despite some success in the short run, this tactic may prove self-defeating in the long run. There are already signs of a shift

towards a more balanced view of past German crimes that would confer on the genocide against non-European groups the same moral significance as has been so far conferred on the genocide against European Jews (without denying, of course, the significant difference in the numbers of victims). Correlatively, a more universalistic German foreign policy posture could emerge which would consider not only crimes *against* the Jews and the Jewish State in the Middle East but also crimes by the Jewish State and its Jewish citizens. With this new posture, those who point out the latter could not be automatically labelled as anti-Semites anymore.

The pressure for an overhaul of Germany's memorial regime testifies to the destabilization of the larger consensus of the post-Cold War era. Many fundamental assumptions that were taken for granted in the 1990s and 2000s began to erode and be replaced already in the 2010s within the "civilizational turn" in the EU, as analyzed by Kundnani. Even so, until the Gaza war it had still made sense to use the post-Cold War distinction between the countries of "Old" and "New" Europe. The strong overlap between the position on the Gaza war taken up by Old Europe's Germany and most of New Europe's countries signals that the usefulness of that distinction is decreasing.

This distinction entered the public discourse in 2002 when the post-Communist Central and Eastern European countries enthusiastically backed G. W. Bush's plan to overthrow Iraq's Saddam Hussein while Germany and France opposed it. French President Jacques Chirac reacted to the vocal support of New Europe for G. W. Bush with the words "*They have failed to shut up.*" In 2022, New Europeans, with their Atlanticist hawkishness, relished the moment of great satisfaction when Putin's invasion of Ukraine "proved" that they had been right all along, and German and French "appeasers" had to repent for their previous arrogance, as epitomized by Chirac's remark. The response to the French defenders of European "strategic autonomy" whom Central Europeans always resisted in the name of the North Atlantic Alliance was loud and clear: "We told you so".

By the time of writing in November 2024, however, things have become more complicated. Many Western Europeans finally embraced the unreserved backing of Ukraine, which is signaled by the nomination of

Kaia Kalas for the post of External Representative in the new European Commission. The US support for Ukraine, on the other hand, has begun to vacillate. The power of Republicans in Congress and other geopolitical concerns (such as Taiwan, the South Chinese Sea or North Korea) have made Americans less keen to take maximalist positions: if many Europeans are open to Zelensky's calls for a lift on the geographical restrictions on the use of Western weapons against Russia, the Biden administration has so far resisted them. With the return of Donald Trump to the White House, it is not to be ruled out that this and other differences (e.g., the more protectionist economic policies of the US) will progressively lead to a geopolitical rift between the EU and the USA. This could make Central and Eastern European elites revise their assumptions about the Euro-Atlantic civilizational and geopolitical unity as the main foothold of their security. A moment may come in which the French defenders of European "strategic autonomy" whom Central Europeans always resisted in the name of the trans-Atlantic alliance will say "We told you so!" in return.

As mentioned above, the "New" / "Old" Europe distinction has been eroded by reactions to the Gaza war: Western Europe is split between the unconditionally pro-Israeli position of Germany (shared by many post-communist countries), the more balanced position of France and the staunchly pro-Palestinian position of Spain and Ireland. The post-Cold War categories and distinctions are no longer helpful for understanding the political differentiation within the EU. Moreover, even if the invasion of Ukraine by Putin strengthened the position of New Europe (and its anti-Russian hawkishness) as a whole, it gave a fatal blow to the Visegrad Four, which has consequently lost the status of its leader. The Czech Republic and Poland agreed with the three Baltic States on the unconditional support for Ukraine against Russia, while Orbán's Hungary, later joined by Fico's Slovakia, took a more neutralist position towards the conflict.

The unraveling of post-Communist Central Europe gave Poland an opportunity to seek a position of regional hegemony by gathering around itself a new Central Europe which will encompass the three Baltic states, to which Ukraine will be added in the future. Unlike the Central Europe that was anticipated by Kundera's essay and incarnated later in the Visegrad Group, the new Central Europe will shift its center to the North

and East. Its historical framework will not be provided by the memory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but rather by that of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The re-drawing of the imaginary boundaries of Central Europe and re-invention of the narratives carrying its new identity will not change much with regard to its position vis-à-vis the civilizational turn of the EU pointed out by Kundnani. The stark contrast between the rejection of Syrian and Afghan refugees in 2015 and the ostentatious hospitality with which Poland and the Czech Republic welcomed Ukrainian refugees in 2022 only highlighted their ethnic-cultural self-understanding. No matter how much the other attributes of Central Europe will change, it will certainly retain its whiteness in the near future.

# Coloniality Without Capitalism? The Critique of a “Blind Spot” in Hans Kundnani’s Eurowhiteness

AGNES GAGYI

Hans Kundnani’s *Eurowhiteness* challenges liberal narratives of the EU: it brings up uncomfortable points that, in Kundnani’s view, may be used as an opening to reassess the binaries of Europeanism/Euroskepticism and liberalism/illiberalism, and rethink both the EU and the UK’s post-Brexit political identities. These points refer to the trace of colonialism in the project of European integration, the main expression of which is described through the concept *Eurowhiteness* – Kundnani’s reinterpretation of József Böröcz’s term (2021) as the ethnoculturalist element of EU regionalism. In a rhetorically ingenious and historically convincing argument, Kundnani shows that what liberal narratives rejected as dark forces of nationalism to be transcended by the European project, has been reintroduced into the same project as qualities of EU regionalism – presented, this time, as morally and politically desirable. The reintroduction of *Schicksalgemeinschaft* as an acceptable term when applied to the EU, or Germany’s 2020 EU presidency slogan “Making Europe strong again together” are just two examples of places where the book’s rhetoric brings this point home at maximum efficiency.

The book’s main observation, that the EU’s claim of universalism is limited to principles of regionalism that include defensive, competitive, and ethnoculturalist elements, is made possible by an acknowledgement of the EU’s outside: namely, that regionalism works as a cooperative strategy to maintain and possibly expand European countries’ standing within global hierarchies. Eurowhiteness, Kundnani claims, is the still existing ethnocultural element of European identity that has direct historical roots in Europe’s colonial past, and has been systematically obscured and denied by EU discourses while remaining constitutive of the European project through the external, global implications of regionalism. Written at a moment when Brexit had been interpreted in liberal circles as the victory of ethnonationalism over Europeanism in the UK, and as part of a larger

process of a rightward shift in Europe, Kundnani's book aims to break the silence on this blind spot of Europeanist discourses and use it as an opening for a constructive relation with former colonies, and progressive engagement with the right-wing element inherent in the EU's constitution.

## COLONIALITY AS BLIND SPOT?

I will comment on the book's argument from a perspective rooted in left and anti-colonial traditions which critically analyzed the EU from a similar perspective, pointing at its role within global power hierarchies. Kundnani quotes this tradition at length, from W.E.B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire to paradigms of analysis marked by Immanuel Wallerstein, Paul Gilroy or Dipesh Chakrabarty, statements from political leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, the Frankfurt School's criticism of the post-war paradigm of Holocaust memory, and even new sociological research on attitudes towards Brexit of non-white voters by Neema Begum. It is only where the book gets to its main topic – the question of coloniality in the EU's architecture – that the coverage of this tradition becomes more scarce. Kundnani quotes Gurminder Bhambra's (2022) paper *A Decolonial Project for Europe*, and states that “[l]ittle has been written about where the EU itself might fit into such a decolonial project” (p. 171). Several streams of relevant left and anti-colonial traditions are skipped here, like critical political economy analyses of EU integration (E.G. VAN APELDOORN ET AL. 2008), postcolonial sociologies of contemporary Europe (E.G. RODRÍGUEZ ET AL. 2010), or current debates on climate reparations (E.G. PERRY 2021) and the coloniality of green policies (E.G. ALMEIDA 2023). From the perspective of this book forum, the lack of East European left analyses of EU integration is noteworthy: this process is covered by Krastev and Holmes' (2019) book on symbolic grievances, quoting their point that EU accession “was in some ways a humiliating experience for the applicant countries” (p. 108). Existing research on how the economic, sociological and political aspects of that humiliation were wired into the EU's architecture, including their adverse effects in post-2008 illiberalism (E.G. HANN – SCHEIRING 2021; GAGYI – SLAČÁLEK 2021), might have had import for the book's core question if these aspects were recognized as a relevant part of EU integration. Finally, an omission to note is that of József Böröcz's (2010) own book on the EU, which provides the context of his *Eurowhiteness* analysis as well as a detailed argument on the question of racialized regionalism that Kundnani's book also addresses.

The book's aim is not to fully represent these traditions, but rather to formulate one basic linkage that they also speak of into an argument Kundnani hopes may be heard and processed on the level of liberal political narratives. Consequently, my observations do not aim to review the book's success in recapitulating such traditions, as that is not what is at stake in the book. Instead, I try to point to places where insights from these traditions could throw light on key aspects of the book's own argument, and show how their recognition may impact the argument itself.

Summed up on an abstract level, the main aspect that left and anti-colonial traditions of criticizing Europe systematically deal with, and Kundnani's argument seems to avoid, is the functional connection between European racist/colonial forms of identification, and the economic aspect of accumulation based on a systematic subordination of non-white populations. While Kundnani's argument aims to visibilize the link between European integration and *Eurowhiteness*, this link is primarily conceived at the level of political narratives about the EU (their blind spot). Although historical references to colonization, or Europe's claim to global power, repeatedly surface in the book, they function as momentary illustrations, and are not built into the argument's main structure, which is maintained at the level of ideas. One consequence is a lack of methodological depth in what regards the political sociology of the narratives Kundnani analyses: the book tends to treat the construct of Europe as a subject capable of self-perception/self-identification without asking about the power coalitions, institutional structures, and shifts of (global) external integration that organize their relations in producing these symbolic representations. This methodological choice is contradicted by proposals for a more complex approach in the book's last chapter on Brexit.

Yet, at points quite central to the book's argument, it results in extremely flat, aseptic formulations that seem to reinstall, rather than deconstruct, the colonial blind spot the book strives to argue against.

It is on the pages describing colonial history where the book's argument comes closest to directly naming the link between racism and European economic interests, and where the rhetorical effect of formulations working against this visibility stand out most. Kundnani (2023: 49–51) describes the link between European colonialism and racism in an



ideational story about the “*emergence of the idea of whiteness*”, with a persistent evasion of any direct expression that may imply that Europeans actively subjugated other populations, and actively formulated an ideology of racist difference to legitimate and formalize this practice. Instead, Europeans “*encounter*” non-white populations, the first African slave ship “*is brought*” to Portugal, discovery “*became*” conquest, and the “*emergence*” of the Atlantic slave trade happens as the result of a shift of focus in *colonies’* economy. As a result, the idea of whiteness has “*the function*” of differentiating native populations as subordinate to Europeans who “*had settled*” in their lands. These formulations, reminiscent of the passive voice of contemporary Western headlines on Israel’s war on Gaza, seem unnecessarily forced, as the book’s stated aim is to name the link between European identity and colonialism.

Why the avoidance then? This contradiction persists across the book: statements of historical facts of exploitation are repeatedly flattened back into an abstract, bodiless history of Europe’s/the EU’s self-reflection. On the level of argument, this results in a reduction of Europe’s inherent coloniality problem to a symbolic one: that of a “*blind spot*” (p. 37) or “*original sin*” (p. 75) which could be corrected by well-intended reflection, as encouraged by the book. Yet if the European project is the contemporary expression of a prerogative to maintain and expand economic gains originally accessed through colonialism, then renouncing the colonial element of European regionalism would involve actively hurting specific European interests. The book remains ambivalent in this respect, a quality enabled by its avoidance of economic analysis.

## FROM INTEGRATION TO CRISIS: THE CONSTRUCT OF THE EU’S SELF-REFLECTION

In the book’s account of European integration, this effect works through a more detailed historical analysis which seeks to link current aspects of the European crisis to the long-term problem of ethnoculturalist regionalism. Kudnani reminds us that post-WWII Europeanism started with a relaunch of the EuroAfrica project, which Kwame Nkrumah described as a new cooperative moment in European colonialism. He points out how the European model of the welfare state and social market economy was connected to gradually closing Southern borders (while gradually opening

them to Eastern Europe) at the turn of the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, and participating in NATO's wars outside of Europe. He shows how this model implied a symbolic bifurcation that made the memory of the Holocaust into the core of European identity, and expelled the problem of coloniality/racism from European discourse: the EU became the "*vehicle of imperial amnesia*" (p. 95). Interest-based aspects of this amnesia are named as "*power*" (p. 64), or as a problem of centrifugality among EU countries differently involved in colonial histories (p. 172).

But how were the closing of the Southern border, and the maintenance of a military presence in former colonies (or other tools not mentioned in the book, like the CFA franc system – the French African Colonial franc in its original name) connected to the sustained dominance of European companies over the most profitable economic segments of African countries, or the profitability effect of migrant labor made cheap through institutional impediments? By omitting the economic connection, Kundnani's argument lends itself to a reading where long-lasting effects of coloniality only stem from a misunderstanding of self-perception. Another consequence is that the underlying structure of economic interests in the EU's buildup – e.g. the integration of European big capital into the global system of Fordist production dominated by the US (E.G. VAN APELDOORN 2003) – is left unclear, which has direct consequences on how the crisis of the same architecture is later analyzed.

Following left-liberal interpretations of the EU's neoliberal phase and the Eurozone crisis, Kundnani explains how the institutional system of economic integration disconnected the heights of economic governance from popular participation, and how this led to the expression of economic grievances through the framework of Euroscepticism. While stating this polarization, the argument yet again avoids naming the different social groups situated at the opposing poles, and the relations of economic interest that this opposition entailed. Instead, austerity measures enacted by EU institutions are described as a crisis within European identity: "*The euro crisis shattered the confidence that the EU had had [...] about its success and its role in the world. A bloc that had thought of itself as standing for prosperity and generous welfare states was now imposing apparently endless austerity*" (p. 127).

Who is this “bloc” that finds itself imposing austerity to its own surprise? The striking reduction of the dimensions of a crisis where EU institutions used bare economic coercion in the interest of the EU’s dominant capital groups, breaking the democratically expressed will of whole countries like Greece, makes it seem again as if the book’s focus on regionalism as symbolic identity was used to conceal, rather than clarify, the contradictions it addresses.

## STRUCTURAL CRISIS, DEFENSIVE CIVILIZATIONISM

As Kundnani proceeds to analyze the post-2008 phase of the European polycrisis – from the so-called migration crisis to Brexit or Russia’s aggression against Ukraine – this effect manifests itself even more strongly. He illustrates the EU’s turn towards “*defensive civilizationalism*” (p. 126) in the 2010s with the relationship between Germany and East European illiberals’ stances on migration and competitiveness. He shows that the simplistic binary between the two does not stand: in the same period, Merkel signed a deal with Turkey to outsource a part of the management of the EU’s borders, and Hungary’s Orbán enacted liberal economic policies. While the evocation of these facts efficiently disturbs the binary, the same section omits the economic connections that link these elements. It skips over the different roles of the same migration wave in these economies, as well as the fact that Hungary’s economic reforms at this time directly served German companies’ relocations to Europe’s East for reasons of cheaper labor (GAGYI – GERŐCS 2019). Fitting into the long tradition of liberal interpretations of far-right politics, this section concludes with a statement on political ideas: center right and far right positions were converging at the time, but this process was masked by the cognitive mistake of the liberal-illiberal binary. Methodologies from the left/anti-colonial works quoted by Kundnani could help link such symbolic developments to shifts in underlying dynamics in interest positions – which is a type of analysis that has been amply carried out on East European illiberalism – see the overviews by Hann and Scheiring (2021) and Gagyí and Slačálek (2021).

Arriving to the effects of Russia’s war on Ukraine, the analysis skips both the structural constraint on Europe which pushes it to support Ukraine as part of a US-dominated military alliance, and the interest contradictions underlying this situation – most importantly, the dependence

on cheap Russian energy of Germany (as Europe's industrial powerhouse around which the whole structure of the European Monetary Union was built). Like before, Kundnani mentions these facts, but omits their consequences for the analysis, telling the story at the level of peak politicians' symbolic expressions of strategic shock, their discovery of a necessity to increase the EU's military capacity (a program that in fact has been up-scaled since the 2010's) and cut off its energy system from Russia. The strategic constraints that these expressions reflected, and the conflicts of interests that developed on their heels – leading to increasingly conflictual divergences in the European architecture, which were further deepened by the pressures of the US-China geoeconomic rivalry, and expressed politically by the strengthening of far-right parties that oppose both the war effort and the Green New Deal – are yet again flattened out in a story of how the symbolic unit of the "EU" perceived the war (p. 148): *"Having previously hesitated to support Ukraine [...] the EU now suddenly and wholeheartedly embraced it. Ukraine was widely seen as defending, or fighting for, Europe or 'European values.'"*

As before, Kundnani makes critical incisions into this symbolic surface, pointing at the inherent contradictions between welcoming Ukrainian war refugees and rejecting those from Syria, and between defining Ukraine's struggle as one for democracy and ignoring the Azov Battalion's integration into the Ukrainian National Guard. Here, too, these observations disturb the symbolic narratives through which the conflict in Ukraine has been represented by peak EU politicians at the beginning of the war, but do not provide the tools to conduct a different analysis of the same process.

## A CRITIQUE OF EUROWHITENESS: TO WHAT CONCLUSION?

The final section on Brexit is where the book's argument comes closest to an empirical analysis of the effects of Eurowhiteness, and a formulation of lessons for political alternatives. Unlike in previous sections, where statements by peak politicians or canonical philosophers are treated as standing for the self-reflection of a whole region, here Kundnani (2023: 155) proposes to differentiate between *"the supply and demand sides of politics – that is, between political entrepreneurs on the one hand and voters on the other"* (p. 155). This welcome proposal is followed up by a summary of sociological

research on non-white voters' perceptions of Brexit, which demonstrates that contrary to liberal perceptions of Brexit as a far-right project, there is an element of Brexit politics that was motivated by the rejection of the EU as more racist than the UK (a perception underscored by the effects of European integration on the UK's migration policy). Building on this insight, the book's political conclusion is a proposition for the UK left to consider a post-Eurocentric turn: "... a post-Brexit Britain might instead, or in addition, think of itself as part of a different post-imperial network of countries [...] rebalancing the way the national story is imagined away from an exclusive focus on Europe" (p. 177).

While the proposal is formulated on the level of symbolic identity, the last pages of the book contain hints of concrete implications, mainly in foreign policy. The example Kundnani brings is immigration policy, where the post-imperial preference could work as a form of reparations – an unconvincing example at this level of details, as brain drain has been a long-standing element of neocolonial relations. These changes, Kundnani claims, would require the British left to "*move beyond its reflex that any relationship with the UK's former colonies must be a neo-colonial one. Instead, it should see Brexit as an opportunity to make the UK become a less Eurocentric country*" (p. 179).

This closure reinstates the ambiguity of the book's argument: it simultaneously points beyond colonial relations, and refuses to mention (asks us to forget) any concrete standards for transcending them. In an environment where Labour took power after ousting its former leader for supporting Palestine, and continues in its active support for Israel's war among praises by BlackRock's CEO for steering Labour to the center, this type of silence may invoke negative connotations in the anti-colonial/left frameworks the book quotes.

One constructive interpretation that would use the tools of left/anti-colonial analysis, but would not expect the book's argument to match its conclusions, may be to place Kundnani's proposal for extra-EU alliances in the context of the current deepening of geoeconomic tensions, where an increasing number of countries use polyaligned foreign policy to stabilize benefits and reduce risks in an increasingly volatile global environment (SCHINDLER ET AL. 2024). In this case, the book's primary target would not be

the debate on colonialism per se: instead, like in debates over Western vs. Chinese investments in Africa, the concept of colonialism would serve as a symbolic surface to negotiate new stakes of a transforming geoeconomic order. While the book does not state its position in the context of other interventions addressing this problematic, it seems to stand closest to arguments that strive to reformulate political identities of Western powers in ways that recognize emerging Global South powers without escalating new Cold War tensions (E.G. FARRELL – NEWMAN 2023; PURI 2024). Here, again, the question of the analytical method that sets the standards of progressive global politics is raised – e.g. how does Kundnani’s global opening relate to conservative versions of the original Brexit agenda, and its initial slogan “Global Britain”? What would differentiate his proposal for a post-Eurocentric UK from conservative projects of polyalignment that seek new capitalist alliances in the environment of a global crisis?

# Capitalism, Colonialism and Racism: A Response to Auer, Barša and Gagyi

*HANS KUNDNANI*

I am grateful to the *Czech Journal of International Relations* for organizing this forum on *Eurowhiteness* and to Stefan Auer, Pavel Barša and Agnes Gagyi for their contributions. As I emphasized in the introduction to *Eurowhiteness*, it is a short book that was meant to stimulate debate rather than to provide a definitive account of ideas of Europe or the history of European integration. In this response, I will discuss the three different aspects of the book on which the contributors focus: the relationship between the European Union and empire (Auer), the role of central and eastern Europe in European identity (Barša), and the relationship between capitalism and European colonialism (Gagyi).

## THE EU AND EMPIRE

The title of Auer's contribution, "*The Empire That Never Was*", suggests that I argue in *Eurowhiteness* that the EU is an empire (and that he, on the one other hand, thinks it was never one). But this is not really the thrust of my argument. Jan Zielonka (2006) has made such an argument in his book *Europe as Empire*, but although I draw on his work in *Eurowhiteness* when I discuss the enlargement of the EU to include central and eastern Europe, the emphasis is more on the idea of a *mission civilisatrice*, or civilizing mission – which I see as one of the long continuities in thinking about Europe. In other words, my argument in the book does not depend on the idea that the EU is an empire.

I make two claims about the relationship between the EU and empire. First, I argue that the EU begins as a colonial project – though I should emphasize that here I am not making an original argument but rather summarizing an argument that had been made by others, above all, Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson (2014) in their important book *Eurafrica*. Second, I argue that, even after formal decolonization, a version of the idea of a European civilizing mission remained. I do not quite argue, as Auer suggests, that

the EU is “neocolonial”. This is certainly an argument that could be and has been made by others, but in order to make it, I would have needed, for example, to analyse EU-Africa relations after formal decolonization.

Auer also simplifies my argument about race and racism in Europe. I differentiate between ethnic/cultural ideas of Europe on the one hand and civic ideas of Europe on the other and argue that there has been a complex interaction between these two different sets of ideas of Europe. I show that ethnic/cultural ideas of Europe did not simply disappear after 1945 but rather persisted and influenced European integration. I also suggest that during the last decade since the refugee crisis in 2015, those ethnic/cultural ideas of Europe have been becoming stronger – in other words that the balance between ethnic/cultural and civic ideas seems to be shifting towards the former. But that is not quite the same as claiming, as Auer suggests I do, that the EU is “*basically racist*”.

I do not quite understand Auer’s criticism of my brief discussion of the Enlightenment in *Eurowhiteness*. I am particularly puzzled about why he thinks that even referring to thinkers from the anti-imperialist and black radical traditions as such is somehow problematic. He concedes my point that colonialism was itself often justified by Enlightenment thinkers – and in the name of Enlightenment ideas. But he goes on to say that in doing so, they “*betrayed the enlightened ideals of equality and freedom rather than acting on them*”. Thus Kant’s racial theories, for example, were a “betrayal” of Kantian ideals. Simply externalizing all the problematic aspects of the Enlightenment in this way seems to me to be too easy.

What is really at stake for Auer becomes a bit clearer in his discussion of Russia and the war in Ukraine. While accepting much of my criticism of the EU (Auer [2022] has himself written an excellent book, *European Disunion*, which is also very critical of the EU, albeit from a somewhat different, perhaps more right-wing perspective), he seems to want to emphasize that Russia is much worse. He thinks that in criticizing the EU, I am “*idealizing the rest of the world*”. In particular, he thinks that I underplay what he calls Russian colonialism. His point seems to be that even if the EU is, in a sense, an empire, it is a relatively benign one compared to Russia – and that I should have focused more on that.



I do not quite understand why Auer thinks that, in a book about the EU, I ought to have discussed the history of Russian imperialism more than I do. For what it's worth, I am not convinced that Russia's past or present approach to Ukraine or other countries in central and eastern Europe can be described as being "colonial" – attempts to describe it as such depend on a conflation of colonialism and imperialism and often function as a way to draw attention away from the history of the European colonialism and to exonerate Europe. But that is not an argument that I make in *Eurowhiteness*. I do discuss the war in Ukraine briefly at the end of chapter 5, but only in relation to what I call the civilizational turn in the European project.

The conclusion of Auer's contribution is also puzzling. He writes that the EU "*remains an in-between polity permanently stuck between the ambition to become a state-like actor with quasi-imperial ambitions – a 'Europe that protects' – and the reality of its relative impotence.*" This sounds a lot like what Christopher Hill (1993) famously called the "*capability-expectations gap*". It is not entirely clear to me how Auer thinks the EU can close this gap and, as he puts it, "*redefine its purpose commensurate with its abilities*" – after all, he does not want the EU to integrate further and become a political union. But I also don't quite see how it contradicts anything that I argue in *Eurowhiteness*.

## CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY

I am especially grateful to Pavel Barša for his kind words about *Eurowhiteness* and the way he elaborates and develops the arguments I make in it about central and eastern Europe. I do not claim to be an expert on the region and when I wrote the book, I expected that my claims about its relationship to ideas of Europe and to whiteness would be challenged – as they have been (SEE KUNDNANI 2024A). So I was gratified to see that Barša agrees with me that central and eastern Europe, as he puts it, "*strengthened the ethnic/cultural pole of the EU self-understanding in the 2000s and has become a vanguard of its 'civilizational turn' since the refugee crisis in the mid-2010s.*"

Perhaps the most controversial claim I make in *Eurowhiteness* about central and eastern Europe is that its "return to Europe" after the end of the Cold War can be understood as a return to whiteness – or, to be more precise, to full whiteness or Eurowhiteness (BÖRÖCZ 2021). Again, Barša agrees

– and adds a fascinating personal story about a Czech student he knew in London in the early 1980s who was disappointed to discover a city that was “crowded with Africans and Asians” – in other words, that it was no longer European. (Since *Eurowhiteness* was published last year, I have been told several similar stories about people from central and eastern Europe who were horrified by the multiracial London in which I grew up.)

Barša makes a very interesting point about the Christian Democrat thinking that informed the early phase of European integration. In *Eurowhiteness* I argue that in the context of the Cold War, which was imagined in both ideological and civilizational terms, European integration was conceived as both an anti-communist and a Christian bloc. Barša disagrees with this – what he calls my “conflationist” thesis. This, as I understand it, is because Christian Democrats like Robert Schuman were part of a longer conservative Catholic tradition in France and all that was new in their thinking was an acceptance of democracy. But my whole argument is that the currents of thinking that informed European integration after 1945 drew on older ideas of Europe.

Barša also picks up on my discussion of Milan Kundera’s <sup>(1983/2023)</sup> essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe”, which he says “set some of the parameters for the discourses of a ‘return to Europe’ during the 1989 revolutions” and constructed a new idea of central Europe based on “the thesis of a civilizational gap between the Russian empire and Central Europe”. (Auer also concedes in his contribution that Kundera thought in civilizational terms, but nevertheless sees him as prescient.) Barša helpfully adds that whereas Samuel Huntington understood the West as a single civilization, Kundera took the view prevalent in France that Europe is a civilization that is distinct from the United States – a view which, as I discuss in *Eurowhiteness*, Emmanuel Macron also expresses.

I find Barša’s discussion of collective memory in central and eastern Europe very useful. He writes that central and eastern Europeans “remembered only crimes committed by Europeans against other Europeans (e.g. Jews, Poles, ‘kulaks’) but never those committed by them against non-Europeans (e.g. Blacks, Arabs, Asians)”. This echoes my own argument that the EU itself was based on the internal lessons of European history rather than the external lessons. But whereas in the western European countries that initially

shaped the EU, colonial crimes had to be forgotten or repressed, in central and eastern Europe they had “*never been even registered as something important and relevant*”.

Barša’s contribution also seems to me to provide an interesting counterpoint to Auer’s discussion of Russia and the war in Ukraine. As Barša says, the way that the history of European colonialism has not been “*registered*” in central and eastern European countries helps to explain why they cannot understand how the Global South views the war in Ukraine in a different way than they do. But he also suggests that while many in central and eastern Europe essentialize Russia and view it as inherently imperialist, they tend to dismiss Europe’s colonial history as an aberration from its ideals. European colonialism cannot “*undermine the fundamental goodness and humanity of the West and its benevolent effort to bring its higher standards to the rest of humankind*”.

## CAPITALISM AND EUROPEAN COLONIALISM

Of the three contributions, Agnes Gagyi’s is the most critical. I also found it the most difficult to follow. But as far as I can understand it, she thinks that I deny the role of capitalism in the history of European colonialism and racism and in the construction and evolution of the EU. If Auer is criticizing me from the right, Gagyi tries to do so from the left – she begins by declaring that she is commenting on my book from “*a perspective rooted in left and anti-colonial traditions*”. But although she speaks of these traditions in the plural, she does not seem to see the heterogeneity within them and especially the different ways in which they conceive of the relationship between capitalism and colonialism and racism.

Gagyi says that in Eurowhiteness I challenge “*liberal narratives of the EU*” in a persuasive way and, in particular, expose the ethnic/cultural element of European identity and what she calls the “*traces*” of colonialism in the postwar European project. But she thinks I focus exclusively on ideas and, in doing so, fail to discuss “*the power coalitions, institutional structures, and shifts of (global) external integration that organize their relations in producing these symbolic representations*” (I can’t help but wonder whether this is a criticism of my book or of intellectual history). Because

I avoid “*economic analysis*”, Gagyí argues, I somehow “*reinstall, rather than deconstruct, the colonial blind spot the book strives to argue against*”.

Gagyí focuses on one section of chapter 2 of *Eurowhiteness* in which I discuss the history of European colonialism until 1945. As even the title of the section (“Whiteness and Modern Europe”) makes clear, it is not even *about* colonialism and is certainly not meant to be a history of European colonialism, let alone an exhaustive one. Rather, it aims to establish how, just as Christianity was central to medieval ideas of European identity, whiteness became central to modern ideas of European identity. Yet on the basis of this section, Gagyí claims that I seek to ignore or erase the role of capitalism in the history of European colonialism – hence the title of her contribution, “*coloniality without capitalism*”.

Gagyí’s basis for making this rather large claim is somewhat flimsy. She says that I use “*flat, aseptic formulations*” in my brief discussion of European colonialism and avoid “*any direct expression that may imply that Europeans actively subjugated other populations and actively formulated an ideology of racist difference to legitimate and formalize this practice*”. She is determined to believe that I am seeking to somehow avoid Europe’s colonial history or deny European responsibility for it – a very strange reading of *Eurowhiteness*. She goes so far as to say that my formulations are “*reminiscent of the passive voice of contemporary Western headlines on Israel’s war on Gaza*” – an extraordinary, outrageous accusation.

As well as misunderstanding the focus and function of one section of one chapter of the book, which leads her to imagine an avoidance of economic analysis where there is none, she also seems to think that the answer to the question of the relationship between capitalism and colonialism and racism is a straightforward one. This is where the importance of the plurality of left and anti-colonial traditions comes in. Even Marxists disagree with each other about the question of the role of capitalism in European colonialism and racism. Meanwhile many post-colonial thinkers view Marxist analyses as too economicist. To discuss this in any depth simply goes beyond the scope of the book – and was never the aim of it.

What makes Gagyi's claim that I avoid economic analysis even more odd is that she has almost nothing to say about the aspects of my argument that do discuss the role of the economy in the shaping of European identity. In particular, I argue that it was the neoliberalization of the EU, and especially the depoliticization of economic policy in the eurozone, that produced the civilizational turn in the European project. Although Gagyi skips over this part of my argument, it was not lost on the *Economist's* (2023) Charlemagne columnist, who, in an otherwise rather positive review of *Eurowhiteness*, wrote that "Kundnani also indulges in a bit of left-wing rhetoric by pinning the blame on neoliberalism."

Even as she almost completely ignores this rather important part of my argument, Gagyi complains that I do not discuss the role of economic policy in the EU, especially after the beginning of the euro crisis. She thinks I ought to have gone further in analysing the internal dynamics within the eurozone and named the specific actors who were responsible for imposing austerity on the bloc and the interests they represented. I discuss some of these questions in my previous book, *The Paradox of German Power* (KUNDNANI 2017), and in other work. But it seems as if for Gagyi, an author has to do everything, all at once, in one short book – and anything that is missing is evidence of "avoidance".

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 ENDNOTES

- 1 As expressed succinctly by the controversial legal theorist Carl Schmitt: "The protego ergo obligo is the cogito ergo sum of the state" (Schmitt 1928/2007: 52; see also Auer 2022: 50).

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Stefan Auer is Professor of European Studies at the University of Hong Kong in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures. Twice named Jean Monnet Chair in EU Studies, he has published an award-winning monograph, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Europe* (London: Routledge 2004), and articles in *Government and Opposition*; *International Affairs*; the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Osteuropa* and *West European Politics*, among others. He also writes occasional opinion pieces for *The Australian*, *The Financial Times*, *Politico*, *The South China Morning Post* and *The World Today* (Chatham House) and comments on European politics in the media, such as *ABC News 24* (based in Melbourne), *CNBC* and *RTHK* (based in Hong Kong). Most recently he published, *European Disunion: Democracy, Sovereignty and the Politics of Emergency* (London–New York: Hurst/OUP, 2022).

Pavel Barša is a professor in the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague. His work focuses on contemporary political theory (feminism, multiculturalism, theory of emancipation), nationalism, and theories of international relations. His most recent English publications include *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism* (co-edited with Ondřej Slačálek and Zora Hesová; Humanitas 2021); *Three Responses to the Rise of National Conservatism in Central and Eastern Europe in the 2010s and the Legacy of 1989* (in: Nicolas Maslowski, Kinga Torbicka, eds., *Contested Legacies of 1989. Geopolitics, Memories and Societies in Central and Eastern Europe*, Peter Lang, 2022); and *Beyond “Democracy vs Populism”: Urbinati’s Theory of Populism from a Central European Perspective* (in: Jan Bība, ed., *Democracy and Opinion. On Nadia Urbinati’s Democratic Theory*, Filosofický časopis, Special Issue 2024/1).

Agnes Gagyí is a sociologist working on Eastern European politics and social movements from the perspective of the region’s long-term world-economic and geopolitical integration. Her recent publications include *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe* (Palgrave, 2021); *Contemporary Housing Struggles. A Structural Field of Contention Approach* (Palgrave, 2022, co-authored with Ioana Florea and Kerstin Jacobsson); and *The Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 years into the ‘Transition’. New Left Perspectives from the Region* (Palgrave, 2021).

Hans Kundnani is an adjunct professor at New York University and a visiting professor in practice at the London School of Economics. He was previously director of the Europe programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London, senior Transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and research director at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is the author of three books: *Eurowhiteness. Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project* (Hurst, 2023); *The Paradox of German Power* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2014); and *Utopia or Auschwitz. Germany’s 1968 Generation and the Holocaust* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2009).