There are serious methodological problems in trying to define "Central Europe". The definition must capture the greatest number of possible shared factors and simultaneously exclude what is not Central European. This enterprise should be feasible if the conceptual boundaries are clear, if we concentrate on the non-material as well as the material factors and we accept that all definitions have both a descriptive and an evaluative dimension, meaning that defining "Central Europe" is no more and no less ideological (though more difficult) than defining France. It should follow that geographical definitions on their own are banal and insufficient, that so are history, politics, gastronomy on their own. One should try to identify the shared elements of all these dimensions. This ultimately demands that we step back and look at something less self-evident - the way in which people think about themselves, the way in which they construct their worlds, their identities, their criteria of making sense of their lives and defining the good life.

This brings us to social construction theory (Anderson’s "imagining" is one variant of this). It starts from the premise that the world in which we live is constructed by us and that once constructed, it is not open to change very readily, even though we can deconstruct it as often as we like. In constructing, what we do is to establish ways of narrating the world and we do this in response to how we experience events, change, the impact of material factors etc. These responses are shared discourses and give rise to discursive fields. The narratives in question are bounded, that is, they include and exclude, meaning that they are the bases of an identity. The collectivity in question fixes these boundaries and then protects them by constructing a myth-symbol complex that sacralises the construct. Finally, the collectivity which has undertaken this enterprise can be said to have acquired particularity, though it will equally be a part of wider, "universal" processes.

The central argument to be put forward in this paper is that Central Europe - South-Eastern Europe has certain evident similarities but is distinct - is marked by a very particular set of experiences that can be summarised as a series of semi-consensual, semi-imposed transformations from outside in which local elites were either active or marginal or oppositional and the bulk of the population was excluded. The particular experience of these cumulative transformations, their residues and interpretations when taken together create the thought-styles and thought-worlds that are identifiable and specific to Central Europe. Where Central Europe differs from France, say, is that it never
underwent the experience of a strong, centralised political power that could condense culture sufficiently for it to become national.

The coming of modernity in the 17-18th centuries confronted these collectivities with an acute dilemma, one that continues to inform attitudes, responses and identities in the region. In essence, the dilemma is this: without modernisation, the future of these collectivities is dim and their cultural reproduction is directly threatened by the superior power accumulated in the West, meaning that they must condense sufficient power to define their own models of modernity. However, their abiding historical experience has been one of failure in this respect. They have succeeded in securing cultural reproduction, but it is always seen as contingent on the wishes of more powerful neighbours and their domestic models of modernity are at risk.

For Central Europe, both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation came from outside. It is correct, of course, that the area had been absorbed into Western Christianity, but it was peripheral to both Rome and the centres of Protestant reform, the German lands and Geneva. It was in this sense that Central Europe was affected, not in any way necessarily unwillingly, by the Reformation and then subsequently, rather less voluntarily by the reconversion to Catholicism launched in the 16th and 17th centuries. The key factor here was that the region was not directly involved in the formulation of the innovations and the new thought-worlds and thought-styles was the work of outsiders, just as feudalism had been. What is central in this connection was that neither variant of Western Christianity fully suppressed the other and the two lived on as competing plausibility structures, the contest sometimes being bloody, as during the Thirty Years War. They infused politics with added dimensions of defined reality that claimed sole representation of the truth and access to the ultimate sacred postulate; in the pre-Enlightenment period this commanded considerable authority and stamped its forms on elites and societies alike.

The central feature of the contest was the irreducible conflict between individual and mediated, collective access to authority, with Protestants insisting on the former and Roman Catholics on the latter. The Protestant emphasis on individual conscience contradicted the Catholic claim for obedience and hierarchy. Although broadly speaking the Catholic thought-style emerged preeminent, and to some degree still colours modes of expression and articulation, it was also affected and in some cases eroded by Protestant values that could emerge as rebelliousness or distrust for constituted authority. But the polarity further meant that Western Christianity was potentiated and not overtaken by stasis, as tended to happen to Orthodoxy, and lived on, particularly in the countryside, until well into the 20th century and, maybe, beyond. The residues of this transformation, then, constructed a thought-world that constituted the cognitive matrix into which the concepts of the next transformation were integrated (or not, as the case may be).
The next transformation was the imperial one and it was secular, though with traditional religious elements in the legitimation of the ruler. In the 18th century, the new organisational techniques that gave rise to the modern state were imported by the empires, but the corresponding ideas that these techniques worked more efficiently if society consented were not taken on or only very partially. The absolutist state, for this is the term used to describe the process, concentrated on enhancing its capacity for coercion and extraction, argued as an instrument for the general improvement of a thoroughly backward society. By comparison with the developed West, these societies were, indeed, backward. In fact, one of the central difficulties was that they barely existed as societies, they were an agglomeration of peoples not conscious of themselves in the way in which the rational Enlighteners supposed. They understood their worlds as bounded by the village; they were largely illiterate or where they were literate, their reading was narrow; their concept of politics was severely restricted. Their backwardness had various sources, preeminent among them being second serfdom; full emancipation of the serfs had to wait until the 19th century. Furthermore, the relatively complex middle strata - bourgeoisie, professionals, administrators - who were ready to contest the drive for legibility by the state and whose consent to rule the state came to accept in the West were largely absent in Central Europe.

Thus the drive by the imperial state to condense power and extend legibility ran into unexpected obstacles. There was the structural one of the sheer difficulty of making an undifferentiated society "rational" by the new techniques, which had after all been elaborated in a different cultural context. They found themselves saddled with the wrong kind of people - this was a standard problem for would-be radical reformers in Central and South-Eastern Europe and elsewhere; and it is still a problem. And this was matched by the resistance of those whose power was diminished by the rise of the state - the nobility. The traditional nobility where it existed was as conservative as the peasantry, though it was conservative about its privileges and status rather than being concerned about the unchanging nature of the traditional village commune.

Here, the ruler embarking on rationalising reforms encountered an insuperable paradox. Imperial legitimation rested ultimately on the proposition that the ruler exercised power by divine right and birth, as a part of the natural order. The problem was that the nobility also claimed its privileges as deriving from the same source. As long as the two were broadly in accord there was no serious legitimation crisis, but once the modernisation from above was launched and introduced rationalisation as an added, and modern, source of legitimacy, as well as significantly adding to the power of the ruler, there was bound to be trouble. Consent was the solution, but this could only be obtained where ruler and nobility were broadly operating within the same political space, where the ruler believed that a measure of power could be redistributed to other actors and where
the nobility did not feel that the ruler was alien, in other words where the nobility had a degree of voice in how power was exercised. The example of Poland was instructive. It was precisely because the Polish elites acting in concert finally decided to launch a modernisation of the state with the 3 May 1791 constitution that would have moved power quite a long way towards citizenship that the surrounding empires decided to put an end to such dangerous experimentation and partitioned what had been left over from two earlier partitions. In essence, the imperial rulers of Central Europe sought only a partial modernisation and to impose this without the civic norms that were an implicit part of the package.

This meant that the division between state and society, the weakness if not absence of reciprocity and the preservation of the privileges of the ruler as exempt from democratic control replicated the standard pattern of transformation from above and the consequent resistance to it. The imperial attempt at transformation ignored the rationalities of society, its cultural capital, its attachment to its own rather than the ruler's norms and in the end, because modernity is predicated on the consent of society, society won. But it was a victory won at a cost. It created a lasting ambivalence towards the modern state and thus to modernity. It set the pattern for a moral legitimisation to resistance - moral, because these societies were seeking to define their moral norms against external attack - and thereby made the connection between society and modernity very hard to attain. Crucially, the impersonal norms of modernity were and are distrusted and personal ones of informalism are preferred, thereby enhancing the incompleteness that these societies are notionally trying to leave behind, given that they equate success with modernity as they see it in the West.

The chronologically next transformation was the direct consequence of imperial absolutism - the reception of nationalism. The cognitive framework into which these new ideas were brought consisted of the amalgam of the Counter-Reformation thought-style with Protestant resistance coupled with the rationalising aims of empire and neo-feudal resistance. The need was to find a set of ideas with which to resist imperial claims that would be superior to nobiliary power. It had to be nobiliary power plus something that could counteract the imperial version of modernity.

So if empires sought to establish their hegemony by constructing a reality-definition based on efficiency, power and rationality, legitimated by reference to modernity and simultaneously the natural order, then the local elites found themselves in a quandary. Some, though far from all, accepted the imperial legitimisation. Others resisted. The forms of resistance were determined by the residues, the inherited mindsets and cultural capital, as well as by the way in which the concepts surrounding modernity were taken over from the West.

The concept of nation that was imported from the West, therefore, was necessarily narrowed by the aims for which the concept was to be deployed and equally by the structural weakness of an absence of society and nation. Both
these had to be redefined or, maybe, reinvented if the anti-imperial project was to succeed. Historically, the concept of nation had existed in Central Europe largely as it had in West. It was the corpus politicum, the restricted number of people with the right of access to political power. In the West, the new middle strata appropriated this idea and the accompanying discourse and claimed that nationhood was the property of all within a given state territory. In Central Europe, where statehood was claimed by the imperium, the Western concept had to be recalibrated to suit local conditions. The local elites, which as we have seen were qualitatively different from their counterparts in the West, had two options. They could rely on ancient territorial rights, like the historic kingdoms of Hungary or Bohemia and claim power in the name of all the people who lived there, or where these antecedent political forms were absent, they could try to define a "people" and claim power accordingly, by arguing that the "people" in question had always existed and the areas they inhabited was the territory that they should claim for their states. The confusion of conflicting definitions of people, territory, state, nation, modernity and legitimations had far-reaching and generally negative consequences.

If the standard, ideal-typical model of modernity in Europe is one where in broad terms state and society are correlated with respect to etatic, civic and ethnic identity-forming processes, then in Central Europe the picture was much more complex. Etatic identities were controlled by the imperial state elites and legitimated by pre-modern discourses of dynasty, privilege, birth etc. There was some conversion of aristocratic power into bureaucratic, though this was never particularly successful. Civic identities were underdeveloped because the imperial state could have no concept of citizenship - this is an absolutely essential factor to grasp - given that it based its claim to power on pre-modern dynasticism which excluded the bulk of the population from political participation. Consent by the ruled was at most a partial requirement for the exercise of power and could always be ignored where it was denied. Thus empire was necessarily on a collision course with popular sovereignty and this was what the Holy Alliance was about.

In effect, empires functioned by reserving certain vital sovereign powers for themselves, like the right to control (some) taxation and coercion without consent. The contest over the right of legislatures to control taxation, which had been fought in England in the 1640s (ship money) had no counterpart in Central Europe. Indeed, the idea was regarded as dangerous. In 1914, Francis Joseph needed no parliamentary consent to declare war; war-making was a part of the imperial reservatum. Legitimation, therefore, was an uneasy mixture of old and new and the personal loyalty of the ruler was not sufficiently dynamic to offset to new radical claims to power made in the name of the people-as-nation.

The 19th century for Central Europe was, therefore, a continuing struggle. The empires were strong enough to hold off the sub-elites as these dug deeper and
deeper into the resources they had at their disposal - the demand for political power legitimated by people-as-nation - but they could not eliminate them. Much as the memory of imperial rule is sometimes seen through a hazy blur of benevolence, in reality they were unviable in the end because they had lost the argument. The plausibility structures that they sustained and sustained them grew threadbare or were gradually transformed into ethno-nationalism, as happened with Germany. Austria-Hungary did not have that option and Russia tried it, but lacked the capacity and the power of attractiveness to make it stick.

The problem for the future was that the form and content of the Central European variant of nationhood bore the marks of the incomplete journey to modernity that these nations made. Vitally, being at most only partly territorial, they could not evolve etatic and civic norms that could transcend ethnic differences. Their territoriality was always questioned and the security even as to core territory was a luxury that they never enjoyed, quite unlike France or the Netherlands, say.

When it comes to the Central Europeans' own experience of constructing modernity, it is hard to see anything other than partial success at best and this lack of success certainly influences attitudes currently. From the perspective of the region, this has created a sense of incompleteness, indeterminacy, marginalisation and powerlessness. Incompleteness, however, assumes that somewhere out there, there exists completeness and this, in turn, implies that the concept of Europe is radically condensed into a model that the Central and South-East Europeans can try to adopt, but because this reductionism damages the effectiveness of the original, it is never actually reached. The outcome is a frustration, which can become the seed-bed of nativism, populism and xenophobic, rejectionist nationalism.

Take Hungary first - the Hungarian model of modernity, after enjoying considerable success a century ago, encountered the most catastrophic failure in 1918, overwhelmingly because it could not provide a satisfactory answer to the question of multi-ethnicity. The two subsequent attempts to define Hungarian modernity, 1945-1947 and 1956, were both suppressed by communism. Communism was itself a model of modernity, but it was highly reductionist and in many respects a counter-modernising process, by forcibly making political and social systems less complex than they were beforehand.

The interwar Czechoslovak model was destroyed by its inability to cope once again with the multi-ethnic nature of the state and by the belief that the Czechs had the capacity to impose a Czech model on all the non-Czechs, who made up somewhere over half the population. All this has an ironic echo in Hungarian ears. It implies that the Czechs learned the wrong lesson from the Hungarians' failure, that a Czech hegemony would be acceptable if it went hand in hand with a reliable legal order, a sound administration and relative economic prosperity - an illusion, as it turned out in 1938.
The Polish story is more complex, not least because after 1918 the new state had to accommodate three different types of Polish identity, each of which brought divergent visions of modernity with them and found that these were ultimately incompatible. Thus in Poland too identity played a key role in explaining failure; to this may be added the inability of the Polish state to deal with the roughly one-third of its ethnically non-Polish population and to seek to impose a semi-Jacobin model of centralisation and assimilation on them.

All the major European models of identity politics relied heavily on the hegemony of the most numerous ethnic component in the state and imposed its own model of modernity on the rest. Taking this model over proved disastrous in Central Europe for a number of reasons. First, the numerical proportions were different, no dominant ethnic group enjoyed the overwhelming demographic superiority that characterised France, say, together with an effective state system that could provide citizenship in exchange for assimilation. Second, the dominant model was able to offer its citizens and subjects an acceptable share of prosperity, a fairly competent administration and relatively uncorrupt politics. In Central Europe, this was not the case. Third, the dominant model was misread, in as much as the hegemonic ethnic group had the self-confidence to redistribute power throughout society, albeit slowly at times; this was hardly true of Central Europe.

Communism attempted to establish something that looked quite new - to do away with ethnicity altogether and to create class-driven identities that would have "transcended" nationhood. This proved to be illusory, but the attempt had far-reaching consequences for Central Europe that is still marked by the experience. Pivotal, communism was bizarrely, even absurdly, reductionist. It had a model of modernity which was more contingently Soviet Russian than its proponents claimed, above all in its determination to set up simple, easily controllable structures and systems, while simultaneously generating greater complexity. This was deeply contradictory and confusing, and eventually resulted in the demise of communism - the victim of the very complexity that it created but denied.

However, for those forced to live in it, it represented a moral order, albeit a negative moral order, against which identities, meanings and life strategies could be defined. Above all, communism established a kind of existential security, so that there were predictabilities despite its arbitrary, discretionary nature. In this situation, the search for order and meaning and for the sources of coherence that is fundamental to all collectivities, looked to ethnicity. Ethnicity, however, while it is excellent at providing collective solidarity, has little or nothing to offer for those seeking answers to the problem of democracy and civility. From this perspective, being Polish or Czech or Hungarian, say, had nothing concrete to offer as far as the political power was concerned, other than a vague symbolic
sense of community that was always understood as superior to communism - seen as simultaneously alien and oppressive.

The end of the communist system, therefore, meant not only the unavoidable quest for a new set of identities, but a quest with quite inadequate cultural capital. In the circumstances, two broad sources were used - "democracy" and ethnicity. I have put the word "democracy" in quotation marks, because it was read as a powerful discourse, a highly attractive alternative when communism had ceased to be exemplary and binding, but for the most part it remained a discourse, as its practical, operational, procedural aspects were not and could not be understood. It was perfectly understandable in the conditions of the reception that the values of democracy, which the West was itself very largely unable to conceptualise, that the institutions of democracy would often remain on paper and that in the absence or weakness of a civil society, civility would be more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

Where there emerged a major and in many ways inadequately defined collision between the West's slow redefinition of democracy and the underlying structures of post-communism was in the area of ethnicity. The post-communists, despite their negative memories of combining modernity and democracy, had and have no real alternative to pursuing this goal. In the light of the weakness of civil society and the eroded state, identity must be based primarily on ethnicity, even if ethnicity is a poor basis for both modernity and liberty. For the West, however, the encounter with Central Europe was traumatising, above all in the context of the disintegration of Jugoslavia, an experience that was almost universally misread.

The Western response was to try to marginalise ethnicity and to impose what it believed were non-ethnic approaches to the exercise of power. This was the thrust of the message that the West delivered to the post-communist world. The message was, as I have argued, both flawed and misplaced. It was flawed because it assumed that the West is, if not without sin (and thus in a good position to cast stones) certainly without ethnicity; this is an error. And secondly it was misplaced because it wholly misunderstood the reliance on ethnicity in Central Europe, attributing it to "ancient hatreds" and a kind of generic if not actually genetic deficiency on the part of the people of the region.

Similar monsters born of the dubious analyses of Western journalists, NGO activists, functionaries, politicians and others with useless cognitive categories then came to pervade Western discourses about the post-communist world. It was a new Orientalism waiting to discover its existence. Not surprisingly, the Central Europeans resented it, but could do very little given the political power, prestige and money with which the West arrived.

In this sense, the last decade has been spent in a twofold process of mutual misunderstanding. The West has constructed its own images and discourses about Central Europe and the Central Europeans have returned the favour.
Misunderstanding is not intended here to signal failure, on the contrary. But it does mean that the transmission and reception of Western concepts of democracy took place without much understanding of the cultural baggage with which it arrived - as if there could be such thing as cultural innocence - so that the outcome was a series unintended consequences, the least of which was that Western institutions did not function in the way in which they did in the West.

The nature of the Central European identity, therefore, should be seen as an amalgam of the various historical-political experience that the region has undergone. It should be stressed that there has been considerable similarity of the types of legitimation and power, the forms of knowledge and discursive fields constructed and, logically, of the responses that emerged. The sense of intermediacy and lack of agency, together with a distrust of power, are central in this respect. Since the reception of democratic systems, the patterns of development have been broadly alike. The preference for interpreting Europe as symbolic recompense for the communist period and the disregarding of European Union procedures are very much a shared pattern throughout the area.

Pivotal here is the legacy of the Baroque, the modernisation of the Counter-Reformation, and the meta-languages constructed then. This underlies the persistence of historicism, the sentimentality, the penchant for hyperbole, the suspicion of "pragmatism" (read as opportunism) and articulation of self through these discursive fields as ethnic communities in search of parity of esteem. Membership of the European Union will affect this model in a variety of ways, notably in the need to accept Europe as a field in which the Central Europeans are in partnership with one another, but the long term pattern of Central Europeanness has been set and will retain its current configuration for the foreseeable future.

So, what then are the key elements of the Central European thought-style? First, there is a certain preference for religious metaphors, rather than, say, scientific ones, though both exist. There are metaphors of wholeness counterpointed by a fear of fragmentation and incoherence. There is a clear presence of historicising rhetoric, of looking for the explanations for one’s collective problems in a meaning that is attributed to the past; and the past is seen as an active agent, undercutting human agency. To some extent, this is a reflection of the preference for thinking in structures over thinking pragmatically - structures once identified appear to make human agency and individual responsibility futile. A kind of determined positivism is the counter-discourse. There are well-established discourses with overt moralising purposiveness and a corresponding suspicion of detachment. Western discourses by contrast hide their moralising quality behind scientific and objective language. Central Europeans like to rely on aestheticising non-aesthetic phenomena. They have a certain fear of being forever marginal, of not being actors in history, of not having recognition on equal terms and ultimately of their own disappearance. Correspondingly, there is a longing for
centrality, one that they half know is unattainable, because it is mythicised. Community and ethnicity tend to be seen as one, there is an ethnic path-
dependence and the denial of this, underpinned by universalist counter-discourses imported from the West. Finally, the region is haunted by its own sense of indeterminacy and incompleteness, of not having voice, of being disregarded and that completeness, and with completeness the good life, is elsewhere.