

Of Heraclitus, Mitteleuropa and Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article intends to make a comparison of the defining factors of identity as defined in two exceptional narratives, “The Places in Between” by Rory Stewart and “Danube” by Claudio Magris. In their respective works, both authors examine the complex notion of identity as defined by ethnicity, religion/culture, politics/ideology and socioeconomics, albeit in very different surroundings. Stewart’s narrative describes his trek across the harsh Afghan landscape in the middle of Winter, scant weeks after the overthrow of the Taliban, while Magris follows a group of four Italian friends (the author being one of them), who set out to trace the Danube from its source to the mouth in mid 1980s. Both authors’ accounts confirm the transience of identity, which largely depends on the broader environment, the specific point in time in which the examination occurs, and the perspective of the examiner. In both cases, the authors’ analyses provide profound insights into the regions through which they travel.

Keywords: cultural identity, socioeconomic identity, Afghanistan, Central Europe.

Rory Stewart’s book documents the author’s trek across the harsh Afghan landscape in the middle of Winter, scant weeks after the overthrow of the Taliban. Central to Stewart’s narrative are his interactions with his fellow travelers, the people he meets, and the places he visits. Stewart’s trek starts out following the Harirud river and the ancient Silk Road trading route, then leaves the Silk Road and continues across the Hindu Kush mountains, before ending at the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. It is modeled after a similar journey undertaken by Babur, the founder of the Mogul Empire, some five hundred years earlier, in the winter of 1504. Stewart’s journey is fraught with danger from both nature and man and is punctuated by several instances in which the author clearly fears for his life. Claudio Magris’ book, on the other hand, follows a group of four Italian friends (the author being one of them), who set out to trace the

Danube from its source to the mouth in mid 1980s. The reader is somewhat surprised to find that, unlike in Stewart's account, the travelling companions are rarely referred to and the places visited are barely described, only to realize that this is not a typical travel book. Instead, the course of the titular river provides a framework that enables the exploration of literary works and historical anecdotes, which the author masterfully recounts to illustrate his intentions. The depth and scope of Magris' narrative, which bears the name of the river it follows, spanning centuries, empires, cultures and nations, is stunning.

Both works are deeply profound texts, concealed as travelogues, as the authors not only consider the particularities of the experiences and places they encounter (or extract from history), but also seek to interpret and give meaning to them within a wider context. Although the authors themselves reveal little of their personal background to the reader, the breadth and width of their commentary shows that they are both exceptionally well versed in a wide variety of subjects, Stewart being of an academic, military and diplomatic background, while Magris is a professor of German literature from Trieste.

Both authors are narrators who observe, record and analyze the landscape of their journey, documenting in detail the people, places and incidents that they encounter. However, their narratives do not conclude with an absolute and infinite truth, rather, their examinations provide a fleeting snapshot of an enormously complex environment, analogous to stepping in a river, which, as Heraclitus noted so long ago, is not possible to repeat. Despite this impermanence, a central aspect in both authors' examinations is the complex notion of identity as defined by the following crucial elements: ethnicity, religion/culture, politics/ideology and socioeconomics. These elements, as well as their interpretation by the two authors, are not absolute and complete in their construction/deconstruction of the observed landscapes; the reader realizes that they are not intended as such. Instead, the texts are above all else literary additions to a philosophically and interpretatively demarcated theme. Namely, as works by Larry Wolff, Robert W. Evans and Jacques Le Rider have noted, Central Europe can be interpreted as a historical construct largely defined by the Habsburg and post-Habsburg elements of heterogeneity, multiconfessionalism and multinationalism. Nevertheless, the analytical framework selected by the two authors provides insight into the broader environment in which the examination occurs, as well as the perspective of the examiner, and although transient, defines identity at the instant of examination.

Ethnicity

One could accuse Rory Stewart of being a man who defies (ethnic) categorization. He is of Scottish background, but was born in Hong Kong, and grew up in Malaysia,

Vietnam and Britain. His professional background is no less eclectic, having served as a royal tutor to princes William and Henry, a military officer and diplomat in the service of the United Kingdom, a governor of two provinces in Iraq, the leader of an Afghan NGO. He presently serves as a Tory Member of Parliament. The landscape through which he travels is no less heterogeneous than the author himself. Throughout history, Afghanistan has been a crossroads of ideologies, empires and cultures, and a theatre for the armies that sought to establish and delineate those empires' boundaries. Stewart writes broadly of these historical events, perhaps in reflection of his personal background, and his anecdotes oscillate from Alexander the Great to the Soviets. Although Stewart's examination of ethnicity is chiefly an examination of contemporary Afghan ethnicity, he does often return to the roles played by the numerous peoples that have previously conquered/inhabited Afghanistan. In describing the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan, Stewart writes: "Then as now, the region contained four different ethnic groups (Tajik, Aimaq, Hazara, and Pashtun), two main languages (Dari and Pashto), and two different sects of Islam (Shia and Sunni). Its mountain landscape preserved traces of lost cultures, religions and dynasties" (Stewart, 2004: 47). However, in describing their current ethnic identities, Stewart recognizes the importance of both real and perceived historical lineages (Stewart, 2004: 64). The recognition of the basis of contemporary Afghan ethnic identity in historical events dating as far back as the 5th century BC is one of Stewart's most profound observations, and certainly comes as somewhat of a surprise to the contemporary western observer.

In addition to ethnicity (as defined by identification with a nation), ethnic identity as defined through tribal affiliation significantly obfuscates the assigning of ethnic identity in Afghan society. Stewart hits upon this question in his description of the Aimaq of Ghor: "The villagers referred to themselves as Tajik, which seemed to mean they were Persian speakers who were not Uzbek, Hazara, or Pashtun. But other people called them the Aimaq of Ghor... who had settled into four major tribal groups", and further elaborates the complexity of tribal identity, explaining that "even the Aimaq disagree about which are the four main tribes" (Stewart, 2004: 124).

Magris approaches the concept of ethnic identity from a completely different perspective. As stated in the introduction, Claudio Magris is a native of Trieste, an Italian by nationality, and an expert in German literature by academic qualification. The importance of these roots is by no means incidental in Magris' decision to write about "Mitteleuropa" (the German term for Central Europe) as Trieste itself is a Central European city, located at the crossroads of Germanic, Slavic and Latin cultures. Prior to the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, Trieste was its fourth largest city, and although ceded to Italy by the secret Treaty of London in 1915, it was the subject of a territorial dispute between Tito's Yugoslavia and Italy, backed by the Western Allies at the end of WWII.

Magris' "Danube" is concerned primarily with Central European identity, although given his personal and professional background, he approaches it from a Germanic perspective. His narrative is mainly the narrative of the Germans (and Austrians) who live and who lived along the banks of this great river. Readers who examine his narrative from Slavic, Latin, and Magyar perspectives might be forgiven for feeling under-represented in his historical and literary exploration but must take into account the perspective of the chronicler, who like all people, is a victim of his own perspective. However, Magris' Germanocentric perspective in no way diminishes the value of his work and its depiction of "Danubian" identity as the confusing, turbulent and often fleeting notion of identity that mirrors the river itself.

Composed of many ethnicities, the ethnic boundaries of the Danube river basin have ebbed and flowed throughout history in accordance with the military, political and economic fortunes of individual ethnic groups and sub-groups. The relatively stronger groups gained legitimacy and were able to apply various instruments of power to solidify their positions and identities, while relegating their competitors to secondary roles (in some cases causing them to disappear). Magris is direct in recognizing the primary role of military might in this shaping of ethnicity when he writes: "Everyone trembles before everyone else, the Turks before the imperial troops who capture Belgrade, and the imperial troops before the Turks who capture it back... the boiling pot does not cease to boil, to fuse and amalgamate its contents, to burn, to consume" (Magris, 1989: 295). The reader is left with no uncertainties regarding the power of the sword in shaping the ethnic landscape. But it is not only military might that impacts ethnic identities. The political power of a specific group enabled it to gain legitimacy, which was then reflected on its relations to other groups (Magris, 1989: 307). Thus, as the Hungarians achieved increasing political power within the Habsburg Monarchy, they were able to leverage this power to both consolidate their own position (through the process of Magyarization) and to sublimate their German rivals. However, Magris once again highlights the inevitable complexity of interethnic relations in the next passage. He avoids the cliché of an oppressed German minority suffering at the hands of a Nationalist Hungarian majority and demonstrates that ethnic definition and reclassification is not merely a question of political (or other) power (Magris, 1989: 307).

The question of political power affecting identity was by no means limited to the Habsburg Empire. Perhaps unwittingly, Magris touches upon the same issue transposed to Vojvodina, then a part of Yugoslavia. Magris names the Bunjewatzi and Schokatzi as distinct ethnic groups, which in itself is an issue of debate. Originally defined during the Habsburg Monarchy, these two groups have alternately been labeled as Croats, Serbs and Hungarians, in reflection of the assessor's viewpoint, and in accordance with the political objectives of the day (Černelić, 1994: 88). Namely, only in the Yugoslav

Census of 1991, on the eve of Yugoslavia's blood dissolution and in an atmosphere of increased nationalist mobilization, were these two categories included as options in the category of ethnicity (Crkvenčić, 1993: 118). Up until then, they had categorically been considered Croats in Yugoslavia, a stance which has been confirmed by subsequent polling of national feeling conducted among this minority. In any case, another example of the dominant ethnic group (in this case both Serb and Hungarian) using political might to define ethnicity.

With respect to ethnic identity, it is obvious that in both Magris' and Stewart's works ethnicity is a fluid category, whose definition depends on the point of time, the existing political environment, the overt and covert forces that shape this environment, and the perspective of the observer. Just as the Bunjewatzi and Schokatzi are groups who are defined in order to achieve a political objective, so are the Aimaq awarded a category of ethnicity, despite the Aimaqs themselves not being sure of its validity. However, the Aimaq's reluctance to ethnically identify themselves as such does not in any way diminish the importance of tribal identity in Afghanistan. Unlike in Central Europe, where national, political, socioeconomic and other considerations are primary, for much of Afghanistan's population, identity remains rooted in immediate tribal affiliation and abstract concepts of historical identities. This primacy of tribal affiliation can perhaps be explained by the above-mentioned lack of outside information and ideas, which undoubtedly tends to preserve existing tribal power structures and by extension, tribal identity. Another key factor that differentiates Afghanistan from Central Europe is the lack of a "national revival" in Afghanistan. Unlike in Central Europe, where the nationalist struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in the states' borders that are generally drawn in accordance with ethnic populations (or vice versa), thus giving ethnic identities the legitimacy that a state entails, Afghan ethnic identity does not exist (internal religious and linguistic differences are often emphasized), and the individual ethnic identities within Afghanistan (Pashto, Tajik, Hazara) lack the validity that a state guarantees. Consequently, it seems that Afghanistan is perpetually stuck in an internal ethnic struggle for power, whereas Central Europe, particularly that of the mid 1980s, has long since shifted to the arena of political struggle, where ethnicity is of lesser prominence.

Religion

Since the Arab conquest of the 7th century, Afghanistan has been dominated by the religion of Islam, and the contemporary western observer often assumes an almost exclusive role to Islam in shaping Afghan identity. Central to this interpretation is the idea that, unlike its major monotheistic counterparts, Islam places a greater importance on societal governance, specifically the definition of rules, which define societal

roles, rules and relations. Stewart repeatedly records this manifestation of Islamic customs and practices in all aspects of Afghan life throughout his book, and notes that “in both Iran and Afghanistan, the order in which men enter, sit, greet, drink, wash and eat defines their status, their manners, and their view of their companions” (Stewart, 2004: 39). Interestingly, in addition to social position, Islam also defines with whom one can marry, and early in his journey, Stewart is subject to a battery of questions regarding which of his cousins he is allowed to marry by Dr. Habibullah, one of his travelling companions. As Stewart notes with some humor, Dr. Habibullah is visibly relieved when a local mullah assures him that Stewart “can marry our daughters” because he is a “type of Muslim” (Stewart, 2004: 123).

But to interpret identity solely through the lens of religion would be a gross oversimplification, as is revealed in Stewart’s analysis of Abdul Haq, one of his travelling companions, of whom Stewart becomes quite fond (Stewart, 2004: 179). Stewart refutes the prevailing western stereotype of Afghan identity being exclusively defined by Islam in writing the following: “But Abdul Haq was not very religious... during the time I was with Abdul Haq, he never prayed, never fasted, never paid a religious tith, and had no intention of going on a pilgrimage to Mecca” (Stewart, 2004: 77). Clearly, Abdul Haq’s case proves that it is possible to have an identity independent of Islam in a society thoroughly dominated by it. Furthermore, in weighing this secular identity’s relative strength and prospects, Stewart writes the following: “Outside the cities, there were only Abdul Haq, Qasim and Aziz – who with each ungainly stride carried a new culture into rural Afghanistan, like modern Alexander the Greats” (Stewart, 2004: 49). The comparison to the great conqueror Alexander the Great is revealing, as is the description of an “ungainly” advance. Abdul Haq’s irreverence for religion and the secular viewpoint he represents aside, there is no contesting the prevailing Islamic character of Afghanistan, as manifested by political, religious, cultural and social practices, where, as Stewart puts it, “the only piece of foreign technology was a Kalashnikov, and the only global brand was Islam” (Stewart, 2004: xii). Unfortunately, it appears that this ubiquitous piece of foreign technology, the Kalashnikov, has a disproportionate influence in shaping religious/cultural identity in Afghanistan at the time of Stewart’s writing. In contrast with Islam-dominated Afghanistan, Magris’ examination is focused on the Danube basin, a region dominated by the multinational and multiconfessional Habsburg Empire for several centuries, but subject to Cold War ideological division at the time of writing. Magris’ sympathy for the cultural accomplishments of the Habsburg Empire is evident in several passages in the book. He describes it as “a tolerant association of peoples understandably lamented when it was over, not least when compared with the totalitarian barbarism that replaced it in the lands of the Danube between the two World Wars” (Magris, 1989: 30). However, Magris allows that perhaps this toler-

ance was not universal as he describes the Slovak experience as “not subject to the tolerant, fair-dealing Austrian administration, often raised by the Slav peoples to the level of myth, but to the markedly nationalistic dominance of the Hungarians” (Magris, 1989: 224). Regardless of perspective, it is undeniable that the cultural identity of the Danube basin is greatly affected by Germanic culture, especially that of the Habsburg Empire.

Fundamental to Magris’ narrative is the impact of Germanic culture on the Danube basin, and perhaps nothing better typifies this downstream progression than his anecdotes regarding the systematic German colonization of the lower Danube regions. This colonization is thoroughly dependent on the waterway itself as a means of transportation and Magris initially writes of a vessel “bearing the 150 Swabian and Bavarian girls whom Duke Karl Alexander of Württemberg sent in 1719, following the Peace of Passarowitz, to the non-commissioned officers who had stayed behind as German colonists in the Banat, so that they could marry and thereby establish that Swabian presence in the Banat, which did indeed become one of the central elements in the history and culture of south-eastern Europe” (Magris, 1989: 65). Later in the book, Magris states the longevity of Germanic cultural exports down the Danube when he writes of “others who set off from Ulm, on the old longboats known as ‘crates from Ulm’, were the German settlers on the way to populate the Banat, those ‘Donauschwaben’, Swabians of the Danube, who for two centuries, from the time of Maria Theresia until the Second World War, were to make a basic and important contribution, now erased, to the culture and life of the Danube basin” (Magris, 1989: 74). Both citations express the Danube’s essential role as both an artery and bulwark of Germanic cultural exports.

However, the frailty of the Danubian cultural link is evident in Magris’ writing on the situation of the Danube Swabians during the tumult of 1848, stating that they “did not know how to act: they did not know who they were. With a leaning toward loyalty to the Habsburgs, and surrounded by Hungarians, they were on the face of it threatened by the Hungarians, and therefore their enemies” (Magris, 1989: 307). However, as Magris explains in the following paragraph, the Germans at Bela Crkva clashed with the Serbs (who opposed the Hungarians, themselves at odds with the Viennese), thereby *de facto* supporting the rebellion against their Austrian kin.

Religion is also an important part of Central European culture and although Magris does not often reference religious matters specifically, he does allow some sympathy for believers (Magris, 1989: 105). Magris recognizes the important role of Religion in the founding of Central European cultures as he identifies the birth of German literature in the translation of the Bible into Gothic by the Bishop of Wulfila from Nicopolis in modern-day Bulgaria (Magris, 1989: 352). In terms of the role of religion in identity, Magris outlines the interconnection of religious and cultural identity in his reference

to Slovak history. Magris writes of Vladimir Minač's article "Where Are Our Castles?", which is an apt question from the point of view of a Slovak, who looks at history from the point of view of a nation dominated by other nations. Diminished and suffering the fate of a secondary ethnic group, as discussed in the previous section, the Slovaks were long subject to political and cultural domination by both the Hungarians (under the auspices of Magyarization) and their Slavic brethren, the Czechs (who sought to replace their language with their own). As the Slovaks were more or less powerless in terms of military and political might, it was the Slovak churches (both Catholic and Evangelical) that preserved Slovak cultural identity and "safeguarded the nation, set up schools and defended the obscure, despised Slovak language" (Magris, 1989: 222).

Religious and cultural identity is a point of stark contrast between Magris' Mitteleuropa and Stewart's Afghanistan. Multinational and multiconfessional Central Europe enables a specific role for religion as the delineator of identity. This delineation is best illustrated in Magris' explanation of the case of the Catholic and Evangelical churches' defense of Slovak culture in the Habsburg Empire. Despite there existing a potential for the use of organized religion to erase national distinction, the case of the Slovaks demonstrates that both the Catholic and Evangelical churches (themselves multinational) do their utmost to preserve a distinct Slovak identity. In Afghanistan, religion is largely a homogenizing influence, albeit with the notable exception of the Shia Hazara minority who have historically been and continue to be victims of intense persecution (Stewart, 2004: 73). As Stewart illustrates in his description of the similarities between Ismail Khan and the Taliban, the differences in religious practices and the corresponding opinions on societal organization between these opponents are negligible. An interesting parallel between the spread and entrenchment of Germanic culture along the Danube and universal Islamic culture throughout Afghanistan can be made. Namely, both authors identify examples which stress the strength of cultural ties, but also provide contradictory examples. Stewart writes of the ubiquitous presence of Islamic conventions and traditions in Afghanistan, while at the same time stressing Abdul Haq's seeming secularity. On the other hand, Magris documents two centuries of Germanic cultural exports along the Danube but points out the oxymoronic situation of the Danube Swabians to demonstrate the fragility of those links.

Stewart's journey occurs against the backdrop of what the Bush Administration first termed "The Global War on Terror" in a speech given in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Conceived as a multinational and multi-faceted response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Global War on Terror saw its first combat actions with the retaliatory airstrikes launched by the United States a mere month after the 9/11 attacks. These airstrikes, and the accompanying operations of Western Special Forces in coordination with the multiethnic Northern Alliance (Tajik-dominated but including

Uzbek and Hazara factions) caused the spectacular collapse of the Taliban in a matter of weeks. However, Stewart, who travels under the auspices of the new, Northern Alliance-dominated regime, is skeptical of its ideological distance from the Taliban. He describes the ideology of Ismail Khan – the most powerful man in Western Afghanistan (Stewart, 2004: 50). In highlighting the ideological similarities between the major political movements of the two dominant ethnic groups, the Pashto and Tajik, Stewart also rejects the ethnic simplification that it is the Pashto who “support the Taliban” (Stewart, 2004: 64).

He recounts his visit with Commandant Haji (Moalem) Mohsin of Kamenj, who he identifies as a hereditary ruler of one of the Aimaq confederacies. Despite being a member of the Aimaq ruling elite (which is traditionally aligned with the Tajik as they share the same language), Mohsin served first as a mujahidin commander in the fight against the Russians, then as the Taliban District Commander, where he fought against Ismail Khan (who opposed the Taliban), with whom he shared a common religion, language, geographic roots, and Islamic ideology (Stewart, 2004: 137). The reader is left to conclude that there is actually very little variety in the interpretation of political Islam as espoused in contemporary Afghanistan, and that political and ideological considerations provide minimal distinction.

Despite his qualms regarding Ismail Khan's political views, Stewart recognizes the absolute authority that Khan enjoys within the newly formed political system (Stewart, 2004: 52). The absolute power that the political victor espouses is hardly an innovation of contemporary Afghanistan. Stewart illustrates its historical roots in his description of the rise of the Ghorid empire. Founded in the central highlands of Afghanistan, the Ghorids were by all accounts an unremarkable and backward kingdom, who enjoyed limited military power because their mountainous kingdom had access to limited resources and as such, did not support horse-borne warfare, the dominant form of warfare at the time. However, in 1141, a neighboring nomadic dynasty, the Ghaznavid Turks, killed a Ghorid chief, which set off a retaliatory campaign by the dead chief's brother, which was to prove the spark that set off the establishment of an empire that would stretch from Baghdad to the West, to eastern India, and exert control over the strategic Silk Road trading route to China. The extreme brutality of the Ghorids is illustrated by the fact that they forced the inhabitants of Ghazni to disassemble their capital and transport its mud bricks to the mountains of Ghor for use in building the Ghorid capital. There, in an act of supreme cruelty, the Ghorids executed their captives and used their blood to create more mud bricks. Surprisingly, this Ghorid dynasty, despite its lack of economic, technological and administrative might, lasted until 1216, when it was likewise destroyed by the invading Mongols, a nation of nomadic tribesmen, whose name itself would become synonymous with cruelty and destruction (Stewart,

2004: 109). To conclude, just as Ismail Khan, victor in the struggle against the Taliban, projects absolute control over political life in contemporary Afghanistan, the Ghorids, and the Mongols who replaced them, played a comparable role in the political arena of ancient Afghanistan. In both cases, political might, rooted in military power, is the fundamental force defining identity in Afghanistan, a fact that has remained unchanged throughout history. Undeniably, the rules of the game have evolved over time, incorporating changes in political environment, ideology, and technology, but the similarities between the Taliban and their Northern Alliance foes led by Ismail Khan, indicate that political/ideological identity is more a function of power perspective than a substantial difference.

Unlike Stewart's journey, which occurs in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Taliban regime, Magris' journey takes place in the proverbial calm before the storm. Namely, Magris writes in the context of the omnipresent and seemingly interminable Cold War. Published in 1986, "Danube" is written against the backdrop of an ideologically divided Europe, within an ideologically divided world that, given its forty-year lifespan at that point, has long since established itself as a *status quo*. Fortunately, the remarkable events of 1989–1990 that would tear down this dangerous *status quo* are just beyond the horizon.

In his travels, Magris sets out from a country which will soon cease to exist (W. Germany), follows the Danube through countries that will also soon cease to exist (Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia), and evokes memories of long forgotten empires, which once also seemed timeless. One of these empires, to which Magris devotes several anecdotes, is the German Third Reich. An interesting example of the complexity of identities is given in the example of the German minority in Hungary during the peak of Hitler's Third Reich. Magris writes that their position was convoluted and that their movement "did not identify itself with Nazism, in spite of Bleyer's ideology of the Volkstum; while Hitler, on his part, watched after the interests of the German minority, but made no attempts to annex the area in which it lived. At the same time Hitler's ally Horthy, leader of the Fascist (or para-Fascist) regime in Hungary pursued a nationalistic policy which came down hard on all minorities in Hungary, including, of course, the German one" (Magris, 1989: 241).

Thus, even in wartime, itself conducive to extreme positions and simplified identities, the case of the Hungarian Germans demonstrates the complexity of even this seemingly clear-cut political identity. Not only is political identity complex, it is also subject to redefinition in accordance with rapid shifts in relative power in the broader political landscape. Magris illustrates an early example of this political pragmatism in his reference to the Fake Czar Ferenc Fekete, who in the 1520s commanded an army of five to ten thousand men, modeled himself after the Sultan of Constantinople, and

alternated allegiances between the two main pretenders to the Hungarian crown, Emperor Ferdinand of Habsburg and John Zápolya of Transylvania. The Fake Czar's Machiavellian practices enabled him to rise to the point of "playing a real political role", despite starting out as one of many brigands and despite being primarily motivated by a "thirst for plunder" (Magris, 1989: 283).

A final characteristic of the manifestation of political power in Central Europe that Magris highlights is its constant evolution and adaptation, and a strict adherence to the newly established rules of political contest. At many points in the book Magris seems to mirror this evolution and adherence when he is notably restrained in criticizing the totalitarian governments of the countries through which he travels. This evolution of political power is illustrated in Magris' reference to the treatment of minority ethnic populations in Romania in the immediate aftermath of WW2. Having been forcibly expelled and their property expropriated by the Romanian government, the minorities are perceived in a different manner when the broader political landscape changes, and Magris writes that in 1972 Ceausescu openly condemns the actions of the Romanian government years before (Magris, 1989: 305). As illustrated by this example, Central European political/ideological identity is perhaps the most complex and transient form of identity discussed in Magris' work, as its expression evolves and adapts to the complex environments in which it exists.

Interestingly, Magris goes so far as to allow the negation of accepted political identity as pronounced in the title of his "Mitteleuropa and Antipolitics" subchapter. He writes of the book of the same title written by György Konrad, a Hungarian writer censored in his communist homeland. Konrad argues that *Mitteleuropa* should be independent of the two ideological blocks, whose demise he accurately predicts. Although one of Magris' travel companions, Gigi, makes a rare appearance to vehemently disagree with Konrad's claims, Magris does express some sympathy for his "refusal of politics, or rather for the intrusion of the state and of reasons of state into every sphere of existence" (Magris, 1989: 268). Moreover, rather candidly, Magris seems to endorse Konrad's reflection that "the unity between the intellectuals and the people, which he hopes will come about, does in fact only happen when power collapses; that is, in exceptional and tragic situations which he is very far from wishing on the world" (Magris, 1989: 268-269). As it turns out, Konrad was accurate in both his predictions – that the ideological divide would vanish and that it would be accompanied by exceptional and tragic circumstances, particularly in Central Europe.

The concept of political/ideological identity is the area of greatest contrast in the two books. In Magris' account, the reader is impressed with numerous examples of the complexity and transience of political identity in Central Europe. Although Central European political identity undeniably has its roots in the multiple national "revivals"

of the 19th and 20th centuries, events that follow introduce a significant degree of complexity, as is outlined in the contradictory example of Hungary's German ethnic minority during the WWII. In addition to complexity, Central European political identity is transient and rapidly evolves to match the contemporary political context, as is demonstrated by the Romanian communists' change in policy toward their ethnic minorities. Finally, Konrad's negation of political identity, as defined by the two main ideological blocs, is indicative of the many options for political/ideological identification available to Central Europeans. This complexity, flexibility, and constant evolution of political/ideological identity, as described by Magris, is in stark contrast with Stewart's Afghanistan, which is dominated by political Islam. Generally, the political environment in Afghanistan is less complex than its Central European counterpart, while the political stakes are significantly higher. Unlike the lesser political options in Central Europe at the time of writing, which are in most cases tolerated and in extreme cases imprisoned, deported or killed, the losers in political power struggles in contemporary Afghanistan are subject to total domination by the victor. The absoluteness of this domination is best illustrated by the example of Ismail Khan, who wields such power that he is able to appoint every single government official that Stewart meets in a month's worth of walking. Perhaps because of the immense power that it espouses, political identity, as a reflection of the broader political environment in Afghanistan, does not evolve. Consequently, the Taliban are deposed and replaced by the Northern Alliance, whose key leaders advocate virtually the same political platform as their hated enemies. Recent events in Afghanistan seem to indicate little change in the domination of political Islam in the political landscape, as the Western-backed president Hamid Karzai appears to be increasingly inclined toward including the Taliban in government, thereby granting legitimacy to the violent faction against which his government, with the help of the international community, has been fighting a savage war for more than a decade. In summary, the political environment in Central Europe is a complex and evolving creature, which allows for the emergence, rise and fall of various political identities, often in relatively short periods of time. Afghanistan, in contrast, is a significantly simpler political system dominated by political Islam, in which change is slow and politics remained dominated by violence and the threat of violence.

Socioeconomic factor

Stewart's journey is in many ways a journey back into time. The land he walks through, at least when viewed from the perspective of a contemporary western observer, is seemingly governed by a feudal set of rules, which maintain the absolute power of various warlord-like figures, who profit immensely from the production and smuggling of opium. Those not involved in this highly profitable enterprise are reduced

to sustenance agriculture and animal husbandry, for which the stark environmental conditions offer little opportunity (Stewart, 2004: 33). However, Stewart recognizes the profound and complex nature of Afghanistan's socioeconomic challenges and dismisses this oversimplification by stating: "In this standard analysis, Islam and ethnicity did not feature and violence was the product of crazy rural illiterates. It suggested a little education, money, and counseling might restore a golden age that existed before Afghanistan was destroyed" (Stewart, 2004: 33). Stewart is also adept in recognizing the socioeconomic components of identity, and by extension, the potential for mobilization on socioeconomic grounds in a humorous exchange with a village headman (who had been a representative of the Taliban, but now denies it). Given that the headman's women rarely ventured outside of his home, it would appear that the headman's primary motivation was economic, as measured through the ability to manage his donkeys as he saw fit. Thus, economic considerations and the societal norms of attire that his women were subject to constitute a major part of this village headman's concept of identity.

In his travels, Stewart returns repeatedly to a central observation that there is an absence of a functioning government to plan, organize and implement Afghan reconstruction, particularly outside of Afghanistan's major urban centers. Thus, despite the catastrophic need for economic development and some form of modern governance, Stewart recognizes the newly established government's priorities as the consolidation of its power and the presentation of a refined façade to the outsider (Stewart, 2004: 49). Stewart is direct in recognizing the ubiquitous nature of corruption among Afghanistan's ruling classes (Stewart, 2004: 91). However, corruption is not limited to simple bribery as is described by Abdul Haq's "little contracts" in villages. It is pervasive in all societal structures, and the extent of clientelism in Afghan institutions and the measure of financial reward are evident in many exchanges between Abdul Haq and Stewart (Stewart, 2004: 91).

This corruption, as manifested by widespread bribery and clientelism in the assigning of official positions, undermines Afghan socioeconomic governance,

keeping the greater part of Afghanistan at a semi-feudal level of development. Consequently, concepts of socioeconomic identity are thereby reduced to only

two categories – the haves and the have-nots. Given the ideological divide that shapes Central Europe at the time of Magris' writing, it is not surprising that socioeconomic identity is perhaps the least explored aspect of identity in his book. However, Magris does include some fascinating passages, which clearly identify the socioeconomic aspects of identity. Early in the book, he devotes an entire chapter entitled "The Universal Danube of Engineer Neweklowsky" and describes him as someone who "spent a lifetime marking out the confines of the 'Obere Donau,' the Upper Danube, and – once he had staked his claim – in sifting, classifying and cataloguing it inch by

inch in space and time, the colors of its waters and its customs changes, its landscape as we see it now and as it has been over the centuries that have gone into creating it” (Magris, 1989: 59). This rational approach, championing the benefits of economic arguments and wholly compatible with the stereotypical view of “German Engineering”, is reinforced and suggests the ethnic and political identity erasing ability of economic considerations. Magris additionally confirms the primacy of science and economics in the Engineer’s perspective a few pages later when, in describing Neweklowsky’s Danube, he writes: “It knows nothing of the hazards of theology, the perversions of ideology” (Magris, 1989: 64).

The primacy of economic considerations is also evident in Magris’ description of the settlement process after Passarowitz (Magris, 1989: 294–295). Additionally, Magris demonstrates this disregard for ethnicity and religious background by claiming: “Until the middle of the nineteenth century one cannot think of nationalism or nationalistic movement. When Governor Mercy called in those German farmers, he did not intend to ‘Germanize’ those lands, but simply to populate them with skillful peasants and artisans who would come to the aid of enlightened progress. As Josef Kaltenbrunner observed, these German immigrants could well be Romanians or Slavs, just as long as they had learned, and were therefore in a position to broadcast and diffuse the industry and diligence which was typically German (Magris, 1989: 295). Thus, Magris argues convincingly that Central European identity in the 18th century was primarily determined by socioeconomic factors, specifically the great push for economic advancement through “enlightened progress”. This socioeconomic concept was only superseded by a nationalistic concept of identity with the accompanying national consolidations in the middle of the 19th century.

Like the preceding political/ideological aspect of identity, socioeconomic identity provides a stark contrast between Stewart’s Afghanistan and Magris’ Central Europe. Contemporary socioeconomic identity in Central Europe is a product of centuries of scientific and economic development, as Magris illustrates in his descriptions of the detailed documentation of the Danube by Austrian engineers and the process of technological and economic colonization, which spans multiple centuries. Magris recognizes the primacy of economic considerations in these processes, which he describes as being separate from both theology and ideology. Additionally, the central role of the state is also identified, as the Habsburg Empire is the primary subject that finances, organizes and executes these developmental projects. Interestingly, Magris makes almost no mention of corruption, which is undoubtedly present in Central Europe, like in every other society and culture. Overall, the narrative is a positive one, where the people of Central Europe are able to earn a living utilizing know-how, infrastructure and resources that are subsidized by their governments, which leads to the rise of socioeco-

conomic identity. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Stewart's Afghanistan, where the author paints a bleak picture of economic desolation resulting from twenty-four years of war and drought, a collapsed society and nonexistent government, and a system besieged by pandemic corruption. Although the means by which an individual is able to earn a living are also central to one's identity in Afghanistan, the lack of a functioning central government to subsidize the preconditions for economic development and the widespread corruption of the ruling elites undermine economic progress, and thus the formation of socioeconomic identity. Stewart is justifiably critical of the failure of the Afghan government in effective socioeconomic governance, but one must keep in mind the unfavorable security and political conditions that exist in Afghanistan. Overall, the socioeconomic perspectives of the two geographic areas, and thus their respective importance in shaping identity, are centuries apart, and perhaps it is appropriately symbolic that Stewart forsakes the ancient route of the Silk Road, the fabled trade route that shaped the economic history of both Europe and Asia, at the very start of his journey.

Conclusion

In their respective works, both Stewart and Magris examine the complex notion of identity through the prism of ethnicity, religion/culture, politics/ideology and socioeconomic factors. Both authors' accounts confirm the transience of identity, which largely depends on the broader environment, the specific point in time in which the examination occurs, and the perspective of the examiner. Taking this into consideration, one quickly realizes that Magris' "Mitteleuropa" is certainly not Stewart's Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a much more fragmented society than Central Europe even during the Cold War. It is a country which has been at war for the previous 24 years, where power is absolute and unforgiving. Its society, government and schools have long ceased functioning normally, and as a result, the majority of the population is illiterate, and predominantly occupied with the necessities of survival. This results in a populace that has limited access to "unfiltered" information and limited time to dwell on this matter. It is not surprising then that complex socioeconomic and cultural themes are not dominant in Stewart's book. His is the study of men in extreme, violent and primeval conditions. However, despite this difference in societal states of the two subjects of study, Stewart's observations have a certain air of familiarity for Magris' reader.

Ironically, it seems that the Central European identity mirrors the Danube itself, in that the identity, like the river, has multiple and contested sources in the rolling hills of the Black Forest, and a fractured and somewhat chaotic mouth where it enters the Black Sea. However, there is no contesting that Central European identity, like the Danube which it encompasses, has a perpetual flow and direction. Afghan identity can

also be described as mirroring its surrounding landscape, albeit the stark landscape of mountains, valleys, impenetrable passes and windswept desert plains. Afghan identity, unlike Central European identity, has not maintained a steady flow and direction for centuries, and remains based in political Islam, violence, and tribal affiliation. It remains to be seen how the overwhelming progression of globalization and urbanization will impact identity in both Afghanistan and Central Europe, but such examination is outside the scope of this article, and indeed the two authors' works. To conclude, both works represent outstanding literary accomplishments that provide profound insight into the regions through which they travel. The authors themselves deserve acclaim for the extensive and diverse knowledge manifested in their works, their impressive analytical and writing abilities, and particularly their ability to avoid a common hazard for the outside commentator, that which Magris describes as a "stereotyped attitude not without a dash of arrogance" (Magris, 1989: 310).

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O Heraklitu, Mitteleuropi i Afganistanu

Sažetak

Namjera je ovoga članka dati usporedbu ključnih čimbenika identiteta na način kako su definirani u dva izvanredna narativa, "Mjesta između" („The Places in Between“) Roryja Stewarta i „Dunav“ (“Danube“) Claudija Magrisa. Oba autora u svojim djelima ispituju složeni pojam identiteta koji je određen etnicitetom, religijom/kulturom, politikom/ideologijom i socioekonomijom, iako u vrlo različitim okruženjima. Stewart opisuje svoj put kroz surovi afganistanski krajolik usred zime, samo nekoliko tjedana nakon svrgavanja talibana, dok Magris slijedi skupinu četiri talijanska prijatelja (jedan je od njih sam autor) koji kreću putem Dunava, od njegova izvora do ušća, sredinom 1980-ih godina. Izvještaji obojice autora potvrđuju prolaznost identiteta, koja uvelike ovisi o širem okruženju, određenom trenutku u kojem se preispitivanje odvija te o perspektivi ispitivača. U oba slučaja, analize autora pružaju duboke spoznaje o regijama kroz koje putuju.

Ključne riječi: kulturni identitet, socioekonomski identitet, Afganistan, Srednja Europa.