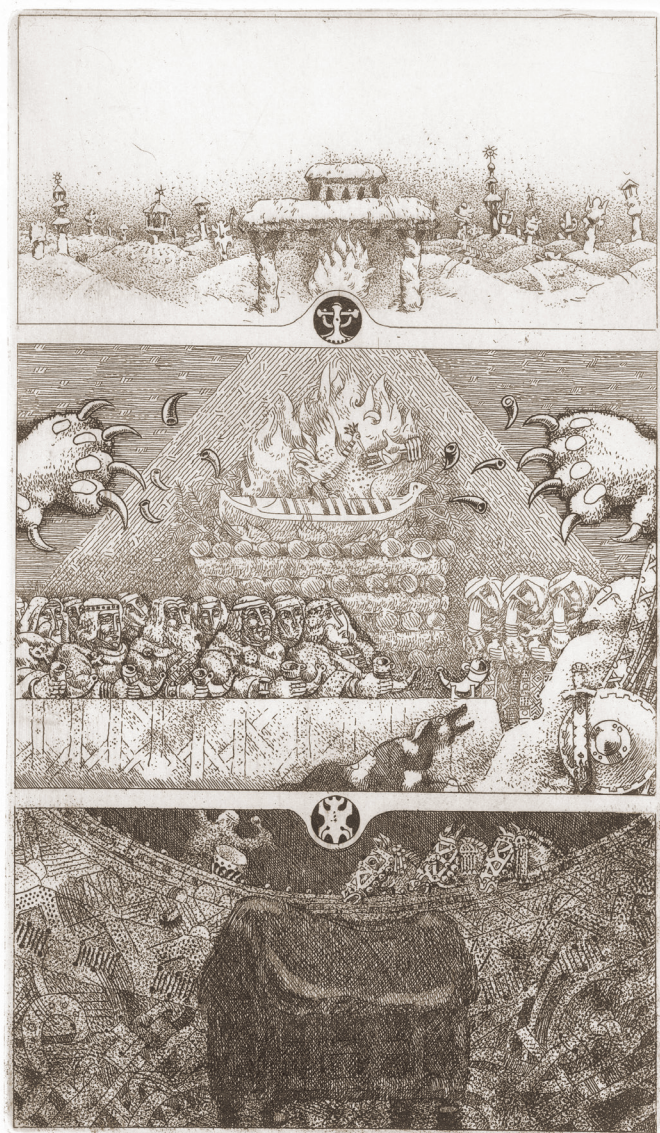


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Reinventing Central Europe: Toward Xenopolis

Book review – essay

Krzysztof Czyżewski. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. Edited by Mayhill C. Fowler. Foreword by Timothy Snyder. Published by: Boydell & Brewer, Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2022, p. 211. ISBN-13: 978-1-64825-035-4, ISSN: 1528-4808

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Michel Foucault wrote that “The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space, we are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed”. These words of Foucault could be the motto of Krzysztof Czyżewski’s book “*Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*” (2022), meaning that its general actors are the space and territory of Central Europe. This book is dedicated to “the people of the borderland, who in song and in conversation with two taught me to hear the voice of a third”. The real importance of this book lies in the fact that Central Europe has long been a rich place for the concerns, hopes, and new visions of coexistence. At the same time, the described events, tendencies, and opportunities of this specific borderland extend far beyond this region, and ultimately concern us all. They include borderland identity through authenticity, temporalities, embodiment, nostalgia, and processes of commodification. In this sense, “*Toward Xenopolis*” is an original and fascinating investigation into the nature and history of Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian borderland heritage, its memory and the rethinking of the past understandings in Central Europe.

Keywords: borderland, Central Europeanism, imaginary meaning, tolerance, xenopolis.

Introduction

Krzysztof Czyżewski’s¹ book “*Toward*

Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland” is an important contribution to the field of border and cultural studies, opening up a discussion on historical and cultural memory and a new vision of coexistence

¹ Krzysztof Czyżewski is one of the initiators of the “Borderland” Foundation and its director. The center is located in the small town of Sejny, former “shtetl”, on the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian border. In 2011, together with his Borderland team he opened an International Center for Dialog in Krasnogruda, near Sejny. Within the framework of the Foundation and the Centre he realizes among others the following projects: Meeting the Other or on Virtue of Tolerance, The Memory of Ancient Times, Home – Nest – Temple, Central European Cultural Forum, Open Region of Central and Eastern Europe, The

Borderland Culture Documentary Centre, The Borderland School, Class of Cultural Heritage, Café Europa, Glass Bead Game, Mobile Academy “New Agora” and Laboratories of Intercultural Dialog, The “Borderland” revitalized the Jewish quarter in the very center of the town. He is the editor of the Borderland Publishing House. Czyżewski was awarded the Ambassador of New Europe prize for this book.

as two significant trajectories within the contemporary world that have caused a global change.

The structure of the book is divided into three chapters each of which revisits and reopens such important issues as war, migration and the politics of ethnic diversity, the foundations of which were laid in the second half of the 20th century. The titles of the chapters are very short: *Concepts, Places, People*. Each of these parts, regardless of its titles, contains concepts, personalities, and analytical descriptions of geographical places. Borders and border regions are thus particularly revealing places for social research, especially in the present era of mass migration, increasing globalization, and the growth of the European Union (EU).

This book situates the growing interest in Eastern borderlands within a set of overlapping contemporary geopolitical and cultural issues. In today's research literature we can find definitions such as "narrating space", "mapping identities", "the geography of identity", "geographic or place-centered dramas of domination", "sovereignty without territoriality", and "disappearing and strengthening borders" which are very close to the metaphor. They are all related to the problem of time, space, territoriality, and borders. Krzysztof Czyżewski's "Vision from the Borderland" realizes these contradictory aspirations and gives them a philosophical, literary, religious, and sometimes mythological explanation.

The meaning of the Europe's Eastern borders is currently changing. By focusing on the informal, everyday aspects of this, the book brings together existing knowl-

edge. It develops new understandings of the combined social, moral, and cultural elements of how these borders are understood, experienced, and thought about. The new materialist and phenomenological approach will allow us to see the dynamics of both the psychological attitudes of the inhabitants towards the border and the interaction of borderland cultural policies and migration processes. Indeed, in this book, the past speaks to the present and rushes into the future.

According to Czyżewski, the idea and concept of Central Europe has had its ups and downs but in Robert Musil's view "it returned to its favorite state of a kind of unreality in a vacuum, returning to – as they used to say in the Kingdom of Kakanien – 'active passivism'."² The debate on Central Europe combines culture with politics, geography with myth, and memory with a vision of the future. He worries that the greatest interest in Central Europe is shown by those who are in exile and living outside of it.

"My reflections, however, lead me in the opposite direction and target the restoration of what I call the "Central Europeanism" to those living on the borderlands of these new countries, shaping new identities, where wounds of the past are still unhealed, and the horizons of a new tomorrow show their perpetual tendency to melt away".³

2 Czyżewski, Krzysztof. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. Edited by Mayhill C. Fowler. Foreword by Timothy Snyder. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2022, p. 54.

3 Ibid, p. 56.

In search of theoretical foundations

In times of crisis or paradigm shifts, imaginary meanings in the mass media and public debate become rare. Today, meanings such as “eternal peace”, “world without borders”, “unconditional hospitality”, “open society” or “the promise of a good life for everyone” remain in the line of euphemisms. Paul Ricoeur notes that utopia is the constant ideal, the one we are directed towards but never fully achieve, but a society without Utopia would be dead because it would no longer have any perspective. Paul Ricoeur asserts: “We cannot imagine a society without utopia, because this would be a society without goals”.⁴ All utopian meanings cannot be derived because they are not generalizations. In *Lecture n.18* he wrote that we spend our whole lives betting on a certain set of values and then trying to live up to them. This book gives the impression that this is precisely the author’s aim: “to build bridges and connect the banks of the river”.

Michel Foucault claimed that “we are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed”. These words of Foucault could be the motto of Krzysztof Czyżewski’s book “Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland” because the times of war and peace that he describes fully correspond to Foucault’s definition.

Continuing with the theoretical foundations of Czyżewski’s poetic and political concept, we turn to the texts of Étienne

Balibar, who back in 2004 put forward several hypotheses that at the time we rarely associated with European events; today they sound very relevant and offer philosophical explanations for the ongoing events. Balibar focused on the idea that Europe itself is a frontier and that any kind of representation of borders is profoundly inadequate to the complexity of real situations, to the topology of the sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent interrelationships between the identities in European history. Balibar named borders a *transitional object* or an *object of permanent transgression* and European citizenship, in a metaphorical sense, is a “*citizenship of borders*”.⁵ “Toward Xenopolis” places the current trajectories of Central European border events within Balibar’s important ideas.

Another important source for reviewing this book is the new materialism approach, which has many borderline characteristics. One of the categories of new materialism closely related to the review of the book is “diffraction” as “patterns of difference that make a difference – to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world”.⁶ Rosi Braidotti calls it “the process of transmuting negative passions into productive and sustainable praxis”.⁷ This book appeared in

4 Ricoeur, Paul. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. Edited by G. H. Taylor. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 283.

5 Balibar, Étienne. *Europe as Borderland*. The Alexander von Humboldt Lecture in Human Geography. 2004. <http://www.ru.nl/socgeo/colloquium/Europe%20as%20Borderland.pdf>.

6 Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 72.

7 Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Affirmative Politics. Resisting Biopolitics. Philosophical, Political, and Performative Strategies*. Ed. by Stephen E. Wilmer

the shadow of the mass migration crisis as an example of the diffraction, which in reality is not only a concentration of current wars and conflicts, but also a long history of colonialism, injustice, political and social missteps.

As a public intellectual writer, Czyżewski explores the borderlands contributing to the debate on one of the most urgent societal issues in Europe today. He represents a new type of metaphysics, putting into practice the theoretical postulate of the new materialism on the relationship between linear and non-linear time in interpreting borders as such by rethinking the past. History suggests that borders and borderlands are the territories where the possibility of “repairing” the “now” exists.

The Xenopolis as the place of coexistence

The important actor in this book is *Xenopolis*, which has a double dimension, both utopian and real. Jacques Derrida in the text *Of Hospitality* wrote that “Basically, there are no xenos, there is no foreigner before or outside the xenia.”⁸

Each essay in this book focused on the idea of the importance of an individual’s recognition by appearing before the law, and what status he or she had in the polis. By expelling Xenia from our city, we have not only hurt the Other, but we have also lost the secret of our existence. The xenopolis is the place to rebuild the connective issue between us and others. “If this undertak-

ing seems utopian, then it is so only in the sense explained by Paul Celan. He opposes a place that does not exist in reality (in Greek, metopes), with a place that might be unreachable for us, but which is certainly real, a u-topia.”⁹ The concept of xenopolis begins with a poetic metaphor, the lost mystery of community which has multi-level measurements, including such tendencies as the intensification of the border, a wall as the lived experience of modern Europeans, and the deepening divisions within societies. “The increasing proximity of the Other, one not outside of our world but within our intimate space once reserved for what is familiar and close builds a new wall that seals off our contemporary anxieties and confusion.”¹⁰

Through the narratives of myths, Eastern legends and ancient Greek tragedies, the author draws the millennia-old plea to stay at home, where everything is safe and familiar, but the fear of the unknown does not stop people. At this point, it is appropriate to mention the concept of kinopolitics that involves major historical conditions (territorial, political, legal, and economic) and different figures of migration. “The kinopolitics is the reinvention of political theory from the primacy of social motion instead of the state.”¹¹ Czyżewski confirms

9 Czyżewski, Krzysztof. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. Edited by Mayhill C. Fowler. Foreword by Timothy Snyder. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2022, p. xii.

10 Ibid, p. 3.

11 Nail, Thomas and Settle, Zachary, Thomas. Kinopolitics and the figure of the migrant: an interview with Thomas Nail. *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology & Culture*. 2016, 27. Retrieved from <https://theotherjournal.com/2016/11/28/kinopolitics-figure-migrant-interview-thomas-nail/>

& Audrone Žukauskaitė, pp. 30–56. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 51.

8 Derrida, Jacques. *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 29.

this idea in the following words: “Nothing, no visa regimes or strengthening of defensive walls, will ever change the fact that cultural boundaries move together with the people who bring them into their new communities”.¹²

One of the book’s tasks is to restore the cultural and historical memory of the region, the periphery, and especially borderlands, whose history is known for its ups and downs, changing state ownership, and successive periods of war and peace. Timothy Snyder in the *Foreword* to the book notes that the author’s interpretation of historical memory and its zigzags has a different approach that has prevailed. “The past can neither be dispelled in the name of universalism nor remembered in the name of the nation”. Recalling the past must be a collective effort that involves rethinking the past, eliciting, and deconstructing consciously and unconsciously forgotten memories. “You cannot get beyond things without getting through them. You cannot go home again, so you have to rebuild home, again and again”.¹³ In this sense, the Polish borderland represents the idea of cultural practice that will restore the image of a past diverse ethnic and cultural identity through cultural activities.

Vilnius as a holy center

One can say of Czyżewski in the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein: “I am a collector of good people.” For the author, every jour-

ney to Vilnius is a kind of incubation – a journey to the holy center. On this journey to the holy center he is accompanied by such names: Vaidotas Daunys, Gintaras Beresnevičius and Arvydas Šlogeris. Citing Arvydas Juozaitis, Czyżewski sees Vilnius as Xenopolis:

“Ethnic diversity has become not only a coveted but also a legally protected way of life that has created a tradition of cultural and religious tolerance ... it is a life that transcends the boundaries of ethnic, cultural, and religious communities. The universal man grows up not in a culturally uniform environment, but in the syncretic alloy of cultures”.¹⁴

For Czyżewski, Tomas Venclova is *a man from the other side*, who, in dialogue with Czesław Miłosz, “established the standard of conduct on the borderlands: not to put blame on others, but first of all to demand a lot from oneself, and to show respect for your neighbors through the effort of learning about and understanding them better”.¹⁵ This standard allowed him to come ‘from over there’, from that place at the crossroad of languages, cultures, and beliefs.

Places and actors

The author named the principal actors in Xenopolis: Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Ficowski, Stanisław Barańczak, Tony Judt, Milan Kundera, Joseph Brodsky, Tomas Venclova, Vladimir Bukovsky, Irena Grudzińska-Gross, Jan T. Gross, Leszek Kolakowski, Bruno Schulz, and others.

12 Czyżewski, Krzysztof. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. 2022, p. 9.

13 Snyder, Timothy. *Foreword. Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. 2022, p. x.

14 Juozaitis, Arvydas. *Vilnius: garbės dvasia*. Vilnius: Regnum, 1991.

15 Czyżewski, Krzysztof. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. 2022, p. 172.

The “Central Europeanism” that Czyżewski discovers in the chapter *People*, in essays such as “Tomas Venclova. A Man from the Other Side”, “Jerzy Ficowski: A Reading of Ashes”, “Stanisław Barańczak: A Widening Horizon” and “Tony Judt: An Elder Brother in Thinking”.

For example, the paragraph *Czerniowce/Chernivtsi/ Czernowitz: A Forgotten Metropolis* includes in its outline not only outstanding architectural monuments (the Town Hall, the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the residence of the Metropolitan, the University, the European rail station, the Cafe Europa) but also historical events, the fates of certain people who at different times glorified this city with their presence. Czyżewski names the main actors, movements, and national societies associated to this place. Through the beautiful and tragic history of this city, he shows how a multicultural and multi-religious space was created, interrupted by tragic periods, and rebuilt from ashes. The author shows it as one of the most multiethnic places in Ukraine and does a great job of stitching together contradictory historical representations. The author is notable for his careful attitude to the historical names of cities throughout their long history “The city has many names, and many identities, and to limit one spelling would limit the reader’s understanding of its complexity”.¹⁶

Chernivtsi is located in the Ukrainian-Romanian borderland, which gave to world culture the name of poet Paul Celan as the concentration of tragic destiny, fantastic

creativity, and deep understanding of the xenopolis sense.

Central Europeanism: between myth and reality

These are the names whose creativity and activities served to confirm and develop the idea of “Central Europeanism”. Czyżewski named “Central Europeanism” as one of the important imaginaries, the importance of which surpasses other concepts. He connects this concept primarily with the condition of a person living in Central Europe and taking upon himself all its achievements and difficulties.

“Those who living on the borderlands of these new countries, shaping new identities, where wounds of the past are still unhealed, and the horizons of a new tomorrow show their perpetual tendency to melt away. I am interested in how to “practice” Central Europe in this post-Holocaust, post totalitarian, and postmodern territory”.¹⁷

Mayhill C. Fowler emphasized that the point of this book is to show and learn how to “practice” the borderlands. It is not about “proclaiming freedom, fighting the state, convincing others of your rightness and justice; it is about working to understand what is “different” to you, such that you come to a new understanding of your own community”.¹⁸

The central place in this concept is occupied by the problems of borderland language as an important source that should rebuild relationships with neighbors and minorities after the ravages of nationalism

16 Czyżewski, Krzysztof. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. 2022, p. 67.

17 Ibid, p. 56.

18 Fowler, Mayhill C. Preface: Practicing the Borderland. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. 2022, p. xvi.

and totalitarianism and revive a language of dialogue and tolerance that can create a community of different people living together. For Czyżewski, along borderlands, a language that becomes a mere product can easily be appropriated and thus enslaved. The mission of the public intellectual is to offer critical ideas that stimulate discussion and offer alternative scenarios of a political, social, and ethical nature, a meditation on descent, movement, and the meaning of human existence. In a discussion with Romanian colleagues about the mission of universities in Europe, Czyżewski wittily notes: “that the terms university and national are mutually exclusive”.¹⁹

Balkan syndrome

The theme of the Balkan war and its tragic consequences runs through the entire structure of the book. The Bosnian reveals a very different Europe from the one observed from afar. Dealing with the crisis of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, the author observes a crisis of tolerance and solidarity in European culture as such. In his view, this is precisely what brings us back to Central Europe and its borderland ethos, as something that matters today and offers direction for the future. The author’s experience of the Balkans allows him to say: “I feel an affinity with the formation that I call “the Bosnia generation.” Bosnia stands here not only for the many tragic places in the former Yugoslavia that experienced the cruelty of the civil wars, but also the lack of

understanding, indifference, and most of all, the deep disillusionment with the West”.²⁰

Conclusion

The author finished this book before Russia’s war against Ukraine began. Re-reading his essays, we begin to understand how Europe has changed over the past 20 years. The opening of European borders (first of all the Polish border) to Ukrainian refugees on an unprecedented scale showed that solidarity, tolerance, and the value of human life remain the main moral priorities in this part of Europe. The book shows how the practice of tolerance, good neighborliness, and the interplay of different cultures form “Central Europeanism”. In the paragraph *Between Timișoara and Târgu Mureș* Czyżewski explains the universal rule of coexistence of majority and minority in one state:

“Those who possessed a particular nationality, and very often also a particular religion, could feel perfectly at home, could say “us” about themselves, while everyone else was just “them,” condemned to fight for survival as so-called “minorities.” The existence of a phenomenon of this type of nation state entailed far-reaching consequences for organizing not only social and political life, but also a way of thinking and value judgements—the “grammar” that we use to this day.”²¹

For him, the reinvention of Central Europe means that “we once again pose questions about the cohesion of the European Union. We pose questions about the dangers

19 Czyżewski, Krzysztof. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. 2022, p. 95.

20 Ibid, p. 58.

21 Ibid, p. 97.

of nationalism, still alive, including the European variant of nationalism, and we pose questions about the crisis of multicultural societies: they return us to the question of the borderland ethos, an ethos that values what transnational interest and citizenship mean and acknowledges how difficult the art of living with the Other may be”.²²

22 Ibid, p. 57.

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Engagingly written and accessible to the general reader, *Toward Xenopolis* offers a new and innovative approach to border and cultural studies researchers, revealing the full diversity of different models of Central European borderland life.