

Book Forum on Ivan Kalmar's *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt*

IVAN KALMAR	University of Toronto, Canada
E-MAIL	i.kalmar@utoronto.ca
ALIAKSEI KAZHARSKI	Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9782-7746
E-MAIL	aliaksei.kazharski@fsv.cuni.cz
DARIA KRIVONOS	University of Helsinki, Finland
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1393-1464
E-MAIL	daria.krivonos@helsinki.fi
STEPHANIE RUDWICK	University of Hradec Králové, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6669-498X
E-MAIL	stephanie.rudwick@uhk.cz
GÁBOR SCHEIRING	Georgetown University Qatar
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0775-8610
E-MAIL	gabor@gaborscheiring.com

ABSTRACT	<p>This book forum discusses Ivan Kalmar's pivotal book on the position of "Central Europe" in the racialized hierarchies of "West"/"Europe" and their not-quite-white Others. The authors debate the main contributions and potential blind spots of the book and its key concepts. The concepts of racism and whiteness answer the not-so-new question on Central Europe and Europ's "East" anew: How come that the populations of and in this diverse region happen to repeatedly find themselves in the very same marginal position in European historical orders? This question has very contemporary manifestations; Europe's persistent East-West socio-economic and socio-cultural hierarchies, among others, co-produce the local populations' marginalized or marginalizing positioning vis-à-vis each other and the rest of Europe or the world. In this honest discussion, the authors chart new intellectual pathways for utilizing racism and whiteness to help us better understand this question and its many manifestations from within and outside the region.</p>
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Editorial

DANIEL ŠITERA

Ivan Kalmar (2022) has written an important book. His *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* brings two important contributions, the one being a literary style and the other a new perspective. In style and form, the book provides a bridge from an increasingly prominent but still narrow academic debate on the whiteness in and of Europe's "East" to talking to broader academic and non-academic audiences. Using racism and whiteness as novel theoretical and conceptual perspectives, Kalmar answers a not-so-new question anew: How come this unendingly reconfigured region of Central Europe (imagined currently as being delimited by the so-called Visegrád Four's borders, namely those of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) and its diverse populations have repeatedly found themselves in the very same historical position in the West-centered European or global orders? That position was a symbolic and real marginalization of or a self-marginalization by the white-but-not-quite Central Europeans, as they were considered as allegedly *less developed/white* peripheral Others to the presumably *more developed/white* core of the "West." The book's critical inquiry into the racial hierarchies of (Central) European whiteness is another key for answering the question and understanding the societal, economic, and political effects of this historical position.

All five contributors to this forum, Aliaksei Kazharski, Daria Krivonos, Stephanie Rudwick, Gábor Scheiring, and Kalmar with his final response, offer what every important book and new perspective deserve. They lead a polemical and honest discussion on the book's contributions and potential shortcomings for the simple reason of both theoretically deepening and locally embedding the intellectual horizons of the book's key themes: racism, whiteness, and Central Europe. The result is a transdisciplinary forum that includes sociology, anthropology, political science, and political economy perspectives while offering a deeper intersectional dimension of colorism, class, and gender, among others. Thanks to this, the notion of white-but-not-quite Central Europeans becomes more or less imaginable, especially when thrown into the variegated relations

between Europeans and Africans or with many less privileged Eastern or non-Eastern Others.

Finally, as a Prague-based journal, we are happy that the authors helped us in the mission to regionally embed the rising interest in Europe's racial hierarchies of whiteness and the continent's "East" as the relatively new object of this research. For all the good, bad, necessary, and inevitable reasons behind the knowledge-production on this region, this discussion is very much a product of the transnational, yet West-based academic field. If it is going to gain a bigger and broader credence in Central and Eastern Europe's (CEE) academic and public debates, it should remain open to being reappropriated from inside the region. What follows is the sequence of Scheiring, Krivonos, Rudwick, and Khazarski's more or less appreciative and critical reactions. Kalmar responds to them while charting future intellectual pathways beyond his book and this forum.

From Racial Capitalism to Central European Illiberalism

GÁBOR SCHEIRING

Is illiberalism rooted in economic or cultural grievances? This question has divided social scientists and pundits ever since the populist radical right entered the mainstream in Europe and the United States. However, the most innovative answers evade this tired dichotomy. Ivan Kalmar's book, *White but not Quite*, is one example. The book leverages the racial capitalism framework to infuse fresh insights into the packed literature on Central Europe's illiberal revolt.

Central Europe, which Kalmar equates with the Visegrád countries of Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, is home to some of the most virulent illiberal political forces at the forefront of the global movement against liberalism. The usual narrative blames the region's anti-liberal cultural legacies for this, as they provide fertile ground for illiberal mavericks. Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and Slovaks have never been democratic and liberal enough, as if being illiberal was in Eastern Europeans' blood. The present-day politics of Poland, and especially Hungary, serve up plenty of examples to feed this culturalist narrative. Yet, this argument is incomplete, misleading, prejudiced, and condescending.

Kalmar confronts this narrative by not only showing that racism and capitalism go hand in hand but also highlighting that this culturalist reading of Central Europe's illiberalism fits into a broader scheme of Western anti-Eastern European stereotypes, which Kalmar calls Eastern Europeanism. And Eastern Europeanism is racist, he adds. Kalmar also contextualizes illiberalism in Europe's political economy, echoing the literature, including my own work, on the role of global economic polarization in Central Europe's illiberal revolt.

In this essay, I will first introduce the notion of racial capitalism, which forms the backbone of Kalmar's argument. In the second part of the review, I will summarize the author's arguments and evidence concerning Western European racism against Eastern Europeans. Subsequently, I will

review the book's main points on racism by Eastern Europeans. In the fourth section, I dig deeper into the economic context of illiberalism and racism in Central Europe. Throughout the review, I will highlight some of the book's limitations, such as the sharp hierarchy drawn between Eastern and Central Europe and the need to elaborate on the political-economic dimension in more detail. This omission is especially glaring concerning the notion of social semi-periphery that Kalmar introduces in the book's first chapter. In the very last section, I will conclude with some of the broader theoretical and political implications.

RACE, CAPITALISM, RACIAL CAPITALISM

How could the stereotypes against Eastern Europeans be racist? Eastern Europeans are White, after all. Racism is not only about phenotype, however. As Cedric Robinson (2000: 2), a central figure in the Black Marxist tradition, wrote, "*racism, I maintain, was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the 'internal' relations of European peoples.*" Kalmar's book builds on this Black Marxist tradition to analyze the socioeconomic context of racism by and against Eastern Europeans.

Racism legitimates the privileges of those who are socially constructed as White. It is also applied to less privileged Whites. Early instances of racism were often based on linguistic classification. The Nazis regarded Iranians and Northern Indians as White because they spoke Indo-European languages (see the Nazis' use of the term Aryan). In contrast, Arabic and Hebrew are Semitic languages. The Nazi hatred for the Jewish "race" was not based on color. Neither was the expulsion of Jews from the Spanish Kingdom 500 years earlier. The British hatred towards the Irish was also not based on skin color. White-on-White racism exists.

Second, why would racism and capitalism be intertwined? Racism is systematically embedded in capitalist societies to justify unequal access to power and resources. Racism is not simply about individual attitudes. As Fleming (2018) argues in her book, debunking common misconceptions about race, racism is more than the Ku Klux Klan or the Nazis. Although violent hatred predates capitalism, capitalism elevated racism to a new level. Capitalism builds on the impulse to accumulate surplus capital, which

necessarily produces difference. The difference between owners of capital, those who labor to create value, and those whose lands are stolen and who are sold far away as slaves needs justification.

As Allen ⁽¹⁹⁹⁴⁾ famously showed, the White race itself is an invention spurred by the exploitative plantation economy of colonial America. Racism justifies why some racialized others, people of color, are incapable of exercising the same rights as others, those who are socially defined as White, primarily White capitalists. Racism also helps to maintain the exploitation of White workers. When Black and Irish plantation workers revolted against their White British masters during Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, it posed a severe threat. Racism, the ideology of White supremacy, came in handy as it served to divide the unfree Black and White working classes. White workers were exploited, but they were at least White, carrying the promise of privilege – the “*psychological wage of Whiteness*,” as Du Bois ^(2014[1935]) called it.

RACISM AGAINST EASTERN EUROPEANS

The literature on racial capitalism in the US has shown how subsequent White groups, initially thought of as non-Whites, or not entirely Whites, became White. Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants in the US were treated with disdain and excluded from accessing White privilege. Gradually, however, they became fully White by accepting the prevailing racial hierarchy. However, as Kalmar ^(2022: 44) argues, in the past few decades in Europe, “*Eastern Europeans have become not more, but less White.*” The primary function of Eastern Europeanism is to refuse to allow full access to Western structures of privilege to Eastern Europeans, and to keep Europe's Eastern periphery in the “*quasi-colonial condition*,” as a source of cheap labor and markets for Western products.

Downwardly mobile groups of the middle class and precarious workers in the West are particularly prone to this racial othering of Eastern Europeans. Kalmar innovatively extends Wallerstein's world-system categories to recognize the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery within society. The social core consists of upper and upper-middle classes, groups engaged in high-profit, high-tech production, living in glamorous areas of big cities. The social periphery comprises the chronically underemployed

and the lower working class. The term social semi-periphery refers to the downwardly mobile lower middle class and the skilled blue-collar working class. These semi-peripheral groups struggle to defend their privilege. As material resources get scarcer, symbolic resources, such as Whiteness, gain value.

There is plenty of evidence of this anti-Eastern European racism in the West. In January 2023, the Charleroi Public Prosecutor's Office decided that the police were not responsible for the death of Jozef Chovanec, a Slovakian citizen with a history of mental illness (CHINI 2023). Chovanec was detained at Charleroi Airport because he behaved aggressively on a plane. A leaked video shows that police officers then entered his cell at night. Some knelt on his chest while a policewoman imitated a Nazi salutation. Chovanec later died in a hospital. His family likens his case to the death of George Floyd. The police contend that it was necessary to kneel on him because he was behaving violently in his cell.

However, such cases are rare. Everyday forms of less-violent racism are much more frequent. The Brexit campaign was famously fueled by popular paranoia about Eastern Europeans supposedly draining British health and social services and taking away natives' jobs. A sign put up by the owners of a fishing lake in Oxfordshire that read "*No Polish or Eastern Bloc fishermen allowed,*" was an expression of this popular sentiment.

However, making this social periphery solely responsible for illiberalism would be a mistake. On the one hand, members of the upper classes also vote for and/or benefit from illiberal politics, from Trump to Brexit. On the other hand, the elites' view of the "*civilizationally incompetent*" (CF. SZTOMPKA 1993) East feeds into this widespread resentment toward Eastern Europeans in the West.

Racism against Eastern Europeans also influences policymaking, as Alexandra Lewicki (2023) recently demonstrated in her article. Leading politicians, including Social Democrats, linked the spread of COVID-19 to the presence of Eastern Europeans in Germany. Yet, they did not close the Eastern borders because Germany depends on Eastern European care workers. Eastern European immigrants in the West are overrepresented in the service sector, specifically in hospitality, cleaning, and care, all of

which are more affected by COVID-19, leading to a higher risk of dying for people involved in these services.

Populist-fueled fears about public-service-misusing Eastern Europeans led to restrictions of social rights after Western labor markets were opened to Eastern Europeans. These restrictions were achieved by linking social rights to having lived in the country for a certain amount of time and earning above a certain amount of income. Another policy area influenced by public perceptions of the alleged criminality of Eastern Europeans is deportation. While overall deportation numbers declined in Germany and the UK in 2020/21, the proportion of deportees from the EU's East has increased (LEWICKI 2023).

RACISM BY EASTERN EUROPEANS

As ugly as this anti-Eastern European racism is, it pales compared to racism towards non-White, colonial people. Eastern Europeans are White and therefore possess partial White privilege. They are White but not quite – dirty White, to use the term suggested by the sociologist József Böröcz (2021), who also contributed significantly to studying the political economy of racism in Eastern Europe.

Racism against non-Whites in Eastern Europe is more severe than in Western Europe. According to Kalmar, Western Europe is not less racist because it is *sui generis* morally superior and has always been more immune to racism but because it is home to large groups of non-White immigrants. These groups are large enough to matter electorally and organized enough to have a significant public voice. These conditions are lacking in Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe is predominantly White, which is why Western illiberals find the region so attractive. Illiberals frame the battle against immigration in Eastern Europe as the “White man’s last stand.”

A second feature of racism in Eastern Europe is that the countries in the region did not directly take part in racialized colonial exploitation. Having no colonial past feeds the region’s sense of White “innocence.” This means some Eastern Europeans refuse to engage in symbolic acts such as kneeling during the openings of sports games. They also refuse to understand the importance of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter

movement, failing to comprehend the racism behind slogans such as “All Lives Matter” or “White Lives Matter.”

Third, anti-immigrant racism in Central European EU member states is a misguided, illiberal expression of anticolonialism. According to Kalmar (2022: 175), *“rejecting the demands of Western ‘political correctness’ proved to be a perfect vehicle to express injured spite. In countries with almost no Muslims, provocative Islamophobia was a politically safe means to stand up to the liberals of Brussels and their perceived lackeys among the local intellectual and business elites.”*

The EU has played a vital role in establishing the hegemony of Western multinational companies in the region, which dominate the most lucrative segments of the local economy. This experience of being “colonized” could lead to solidarity with other regions exploited by Western capital. However, the monopoly of illiberal propaganda creates the opposite effect. Regular nationwide campaigns drive Eastern Europeans to reaffirm their Whiteness as a claim to the White privilege the West enjoys. *“The desire to be among the beneficiaries and not among the victims of White privilege goes a long way toward explaining the success of racist rhetoric among many Central Europeans”* (IBID.: 197).

As a social anthropologist, Kalmar mainly concentrates on the cultural and historical dimensions, focusing less on the economy. However, my research on the role of national capitalists in Hungary’s illiberal turn underpins his narrative (SCHEIRING 2022). These national capitalists have been lobbying for a long time to get more protection against transnational corporations. However, each government until 2010, especially the Socialist-Liberal coalitions, pushed policies that favored foreign investors over domestic capital. While these policies contributed to the emergence of a competitive export sector, they also led to a schism between the foreign-dominated tech-intensive export sectors of the economy and the less competitive, non-tech, domestically oriented sectors.

The Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán (who declared the country’s illiberal turn in one of his speeches) realized the political potential in the frustration of the national capitalists and forged a close alliance with them. The interests of this political-economic alliance drive the clash with foreign

powers and multinationals. However, this alliance is too weak to break the dominance of multinationals in the manufacturing export sectors, so they are left with domestically oriented services and construction – sectors where economic nationalism has dominated under Orbán.

Orbán also manages to sell this alliance to workers disgruntled with the postsocialist transition, who also associate multinationals with colonization and exploitation (SCHEIRING 2020A). However, as Kalmar also argues, this “anti-colonial” fight is not intended to emancipate workers and precarious lower-middle classes; the primary goal is to enrich the new elite around Orbán. The exclusionary nationalism directed at immigrants and other minorities pacifies the regime’s relative victims and consolidates Orbán’s controversial illiberal alliance.

CENTRAL OR EASTERN EUROPE

Eastern Europeans also create hierarchies among themselves, such as “Central Europe” (dominantly Catholic or Protestant, Visegrád countries) vs. Eastern Europe (Orthodox Christian post-Soviet countries) vs. the Balkans (Orthodox and also with an Islamic influence). Kalmar (2022: 197) is critical of these imagined hierarchies. He critically notes that constructing Central Europe is “*not an innocent historical exercise.*” Central European elites locate their countries on the Western side of Europe while keeping their Eastern and Southeastern neighbors in the role of the devalued Other. In this regard, Kalmar follows in the footsteps of the likes of Maria Todorova (2009) and Attila Melegh (2006), albeit with a more explicit focus on racism. Thus, it would have been nice to see more engagement, especially with Melegh, while keeping this critical focus on the East-West slope throughout the book.

However, Kalmar inadvertently seems to reinforce this distinction between Central and Eastern Europe in the chapter on half-truths about Central Europe. In this respect, Kalmar’s book shows how hard it is, even for him, to go beyond such distinction-making when trying to show that Easterners are as (economically) White as Westerners. This points to the overall stickiness of this othering paradigm and the lack of alternative paradigms that would allow us to speak differently about the East than just through comparisons of it with the West.

The primary aim of this chapter is to debunk Eastern Europeanist prejudices by showing that Central Europe is not that different from the West. For example, in terms of criminality and peace, the countries of Central Europe are among the best performing globally; Czechia is 8th, and Hungary is 13th worldwide, according to the Global Peace Index (INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS & PEACE 2023).

The most thought-provoking aspect of these comparisons is when Kalmar compares regions and cities. For example, the GDP per capita PPP in Czechia is higher than that in Mississippi. Budapest's GDP per capita PPP is higher than Italy's or Kentucky's. Indeed, Prague and Budapest are among the "richest" regions in the EU (EUROSTAT 2023), which is, of course, due to the high concentration of foreign investment in these cities, which deepens the metropolis-province inequalities. These numbers show not that Central Europe is rich but that there are substantial regional inequalities both in the East and in the West. Western regions left behind are at the level of semi-peripheral, emerging economies, which is an essential factor behind the popularity of radical right populism in these regions. The socially semi-peripheral position of key segments of Western societies again highlights the parallels between East and West. This is one more reason why it would have been great to read more about the idea of the social periphery in the book.

No matter the GDP figures, wages in the East-Central European region lag far behind those in the West. While the GDP per capita of Hungary is higher than that of Wales, the yearly net medium wage in Hungary is half of the medium wage in Wales. *"It is obvious that, despite what is still a relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth in Central Europe, a highly disproportionate amount of the wealth generated since the return to capitalism has gone to employers and investors, rather than people living off their wages"* (p. 139). Here, Kalmar touches upon a misleading feature of East-Central Europe's political economy: how the mirage of economic growth and export competitiveness masks the developmental bottlenecks and the massive social and economic disintegration (SCHEIRING 2021).

Importantly, Kalmar also highlights that until recently, Central Europe was not significantly less democratic than many countries in Western Europe. Hungary boasted a high level of support for liberal values

and institutions right before Viktor Orbán took power – there was no cultural demand for the destruction of democracy (PEW RESEARCH CENTRE 2009). Czechia continues to beat many Western countries in several indicators of democracy. Democracy has similar roots in Central Europe as in several Western countries considered stable democracies today. The liberal constitution passed by the Polish parliament, the Sejm, in 1791 was the first written constitution in Europe.

Racism is also not historically given in the region. Kalmar tells the story of Polish soldiers sent by Napoleon to fight against the Haitian rebels. However, after their arrival in Haiti, they joined the enslaved Black people. In response, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first head of state of the first Black republic, called these Polish soldiers “*White Blacks of Europe*.”

CONCLUSIONS

White but not Quite makes crucial innovations that will change how we think about illiberalism. Extending the racial capitalism framework has a vast untapped potential to help us understand Eastern Europe’s illiberal turn. The book is a bold challenge against an essentializing culturalist narrative that is popular not only among disgruntled workers worried about Eastern European immigrants draining Western public services but also among the liberal mainstream in Western and Eastern Europe. Because of this, the book is undoubtedly going to raise some eyebrows. However, Kalmar, a social anthropologist at the University of Toronto, does not shy away from the task. His book does a convincing job of dissecting Eastern Europeanism as a form of racism rooted in economic inequalities, as Eastern Europeans’ racism against racialized others is also partially driven by economic logic.

Kalmar’s book shows that the culture of racism and illiberalism in Europe is deeply intertwined with Europe’s political economy. The notion of the social semi-periphery Kalmar introduces in the book’s first chapter as a framework to explain the racism of downwardly mobile middle- and working-class people also has a vast potential. It would have been great to see this idea applied later in the empirical chapters, but it never turns up again after the introduction.

Even with this limitation, the book offers lessons for not only social theory and research but also politics. It reminds us that the idea of the core, equating to democracy, well-being, and peace, versus the (semi-)periphery, equating to illiberalism, misery, and violence, is deeply flawed. All the ideals connected with the core can be realized at lower income levels just as well as in the most advanced core countries, provided that more equitable conditions prevail. For that, the semi-periphery needs to abandon the competition for White privilege (we might also call it the imperial model of living) and focus on the fact that one can be happy and live a comfortable “non-White” life in semi-peripheral societies, such as East-Central Europe.

Kalmar’s book is one of the most significant current attempts to bring the Black Marxist tradition into dialogue with racism against and by Eastern Europeans. It is a book that everyone should read to understand the political economy of racism and illiberalism in Europe.

“White but not Quite”: Postsocialist Resentment and Its Eastern Others?

DARIA KRIVONOS

Ivan Kalmar’s *White but Not Quite: Central Europe’s Illiberal Revolt* is a contribution to the growing body of work which explores race, racialization, whiteness and (post)coloniality in the region commonly referred to as either “Central and Eastern Europe,” “East Central Europe,” “Central Europe” or “Eastern Europe” – terms which typically open an extensive discussion. With scholarly work on race focusing on white/non-white dualities predominantly in Anglo-American contexts, Kalmar’s book is a much-needed work in the burgeoning discussion on race in the CEE region.

The author reveals his approaches to the topic already in the title of the book: “illiberalism” and “Central Europe” are loaded terms that signal the author’s choices regarding the agenda that the book offers. Kalmar (2022: 105) frames the major task of his contribution as restoring “Central Europe” in the middle of “*the unbridgeable contrast between Eastern and Western Europe.*” Defending “Central Europe” as a geopolitical entity distinct from both Western and Eastern Europe is a provocative move at a time when many scholars started to move away from dividing the world into “areas” and separate geotemporalities, and when decolonial scholarship in the region has increasingly questioned the distinction between “Central” and “Eastern” Europe. This partly comes as a response to the observation that nobody wants to be identified with “*Eastern Europe*” as a sign of backwardness (E.G. BOATCĂ – ȚICHINDELEANU – ÎȘLEYEN 2021).

I read the book from the perspective of my own research conducted on the eastern borders of the EU, namely in Finland and Poland, where I observed significant effort from both migrants coming from the neighboring eastern countries and nation-state narratives to disidentify from “Eastern Europe” – of course, at the expense of those racialized further down the hierarchy of value (KRIVONOS – NĂRE 2019; KRIVONOS 2022). From this perspective, at times, the book reads as an attempt to unveil some of the common stereotypes about the region, while making an effort to distinguish it from Eastern “backwardness” and move it closer to the West. It then becomes

an appeal primarily to a Western reader and aims to convince them that “*the things said about ‘Eastern Europe’ are mostly false, even though they may have an element of truth in them*” (p. 105). This type of “fact-checking” runs the risk of reproducing the Eurocentric episteme where global populations are graded hierarchically and measured against each other along the lines of “*freedom and democracy, corruption, criminality, [and] human development,*” which are taken at face value and as central criteria for measuring the region’s position in the global hierarchies (Chapter 4). The project of unveiling “*half-truths*” then produces the region (and other global populations) exclusively through the Western lens and value systems that continue to portray the region through the narratives of civilizational development and the immaturity of its capitalist market economies and democracies. Instead of unmaking this project rooted in the (in fact, racist) tradition of the Enlightenment, the book frequently attempts to recognize the region as part of the West, where “*the Happiness Report ranks Prague right next to Paris*” (p. 128). The need or the desire to compare everything to Western capitals then remains intact, which is an observation aptly made by Anca Parvulescu (2020) (and indeed, cited by Kalmar) when she invites East European scholars to bypass Paris, Vienna and New York as mediators of our conversations on the region. Showcasing the region’s affinity to the values of the Enlightenment can become another attempt to recenter whiteness and prove “Central Europe’s” proximity to Europeaness proper, thus running against the project of decolonization.

In the rest of my reaction, I will use this perspective to discuss the book. First, I examine how the work of “*fact-checking*” based on racializing criteria of “freedom and human development” inevitably produces the racialized Other. I discuss Kalmar’s important contribution to current debates on (post-)coloniality in the region, namely, the ways in which some academic theories became appropriated for certain political gains. Second, I discuss the approach of comparing the “degrees of violence” experienced by differently racialized people through the topic of gendered political economy of movement. Finally, I engage with the proposed idea that “illiberalism” threatens a “democratic order.” I offer my remarks from the perspective of continuing the important conversation to which Kalmar’s book is certainly a major contribution.

THE TRAP OF NESTING ORIENTALISMS (YET AGAIN) WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

With the values of “development” and “progress” put at the center of the book’s “fact-checking,” it is no accident then that “Central Europe” is often compared to Russia, Belarus and Ukraine with the latter three scoring much lower than their western counterparts. Such comparisons can become illustrations for Kalmar’s own important argument on the attempts of “Central European” elites to distance themselves from any associations with the East. The effect of such comparisons is the remaking of the catching up narrative through which the wider region has been often narrated: *“Central Europe is below Western Europe, but above the rest of Eastern Europe, and on some measures closer to the West than to the East”* (p. 139). This effort to distance the region from “Eastern Europe” proper and align it with the West fixes the region in essential geopolitical boundaries and misses the opportunity to build possible coalitions with other racialized subjects who may not be equally invested in the idea of “Central Europe” or who originate from beyond its demarcated borders. Those coming from the east of “Central Europe” are then left wondering about the following question: if “Eastern Europeanism” is wrong for “Central Europeans,” does this mean that the violence against those further east is justifiable because they have not progressed enough in the hierarchies of development? If “*Eastern Europeanism*” wrongly racializes “*Central Europeans*” and we must defend “Central Europe” as an entity distinct from “Eastern Europe,” does this imply that the aim of “Eastern Europeanism” is simply misplaced and should be directed against the real “backwards” states further east?

This move of unveiling the myths through the reproduction of the Western lens runs against some very important arguments made further on in the book. The book’s powerful contribution lies in questioning the recent instrumentalization of the postcolonial discourse in Central Europe, especially by right-wing political formations. Kalmar importantly shows how the cry “We are not a colony!,” which is directed against the West as a response to Central Europe becoming its periphery, has little to do with any solidarity with the global South (Chapter 8). In fact, *“the last thing the illiberals want is to be seriously compared to the racialised populations in or from the former colonies”* (p. 216). The instrumentalizing of the postcolonial discourse by right-wing formations in Central Europe goes hand in hand

with the desire to be counted “*not with the ‘Asian’ East but with the ‘European’ West.*” Kalmar shows the effort of Central European political elites to distance themselves from the East and especially authoritarian Russia. The calls to compare the postcolonial and the post-communist condition – which became particularly strong in the aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion into Ukraine – have rarely led to any meaningful solidarity with migrants from the global South, whose movement the Central European states are violently and actively stopping – indeed, in the name of EU/rope. This is a timely and much needed reminder at a time when the “postcolonial” entered the everyday language and is oftentimes used by right-wing formations to claim their innocence.

In line with this, Kalmar ^(2022: 5) shows that the potent narrative of unification with Europe vis-à-vis communism and the “East” goes hand in hand with the will to be accepted in white privilege on par with the West: “*The dream of ‘transition’ from communism was that they would fully access white privilege – live the same standard as the West and be accepted as equal by it.*” This claim is an important challenge to supposedly innocent race-less narratives of the “return to Europe.” This could be a great starting point and an opportunity to further examine the region’s entanglements with global structures of race and coloniality, and the desires, fantasies, and material practices of domination over racialized others, even if from the perspective of a global semi-periphery. Indeed, many Central and East European governments, from Hungary to Bulgaria, have been highly successful in articulating white supremacy, and became models for many fascist groups far beyond the region. This would be an important opportunity to explore the region’s own active reproduction of racial violence and the becoming of the frontier between “Europe” and its Others.

Yet, the book articulates the racism of Central Europe predominantly as a postsocialist phenomenon rooted in the region’s resentment against the Western-dominated, global market neoliberalism that turned the region into a mere pool of cheapened labor. In such a picture, racism becomes external and alien to Central Europe, originating exclusively as a resentment towards the West. The analysis then fails to see the socialist and pre-socialist era structural racism within the region, and the desire to partake in colonial conquest beyond “Europe.” This logic can be easily inverted into a simple plea to become included in the Western core as

proper whites, and not just as “not quite white” ones. It also takes away the responsibility for racism from Central European states, reproducing the idea that race and racism are only matters of Western colonial empires. In addition, describing the region’s population as “*almost entirely white*” (p. 147) in several part of the book may easily feed into silencing discussions about anti-Roma racism, which is far from being just a post-Cold War phenomenon. Racial hierarchies and claims to whiteness have been long construed vis-à-vis Roma people long before any resentment against postsocialist capitalist development. The book’s important arguments could thus be strengthened through an engagement with longer histories of racism in the region, which would give more space to those who have long been at its receiving end.

BLINDSPOTTING THE RACIALIZED RELATIONS OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

When examining the racialization of East Europeans or what Kalmar calls “*East Europeanism*,” the book argues that what is different from the situation of (formerly) colonized Others is that East Europeans are white, even if not quite, which gives them a potential access to white privilege. Throughout the book, Kalmar (2022: 36) argues repeatedly that racism experienced by (white) East Europeans is nowhere as close to that targeting non-white populations, and so far has not been morphed into systemic, as opposed to “*personal and sporadic violence*.” In this argumentation, the problem is presented as a matter of *degrees* of violence, which are experienced individually. It then reproduces the idea that racism is merely a matter of an individualized “*event*” (LENTIN 2020). It is indeed important to recognize different forms of racist violence, as Kalmar does. But it could also be productive to talk about different *logics* behind different forms of racialization, and the ways in which they co-constitute one another. Wouldn’t West European markets’ reliance on the seasonal, care and service labor force coming from Central (and Eastern) Europe, together with the inter-generational violence it entails, be considered structural rather than sporadic and personal? In fact, as Raia Apostolova and Tstevlina Hristova (2021) argue, to many across the region, migration became a means of social reproduction, that is, a way to revitalize one’s life itself – a condition from which West European labor markets benefit enormously. Would such displaced models of social reproduction for which West European

states pay nothing be considered sporadic? And how does the recruitment of cheapened labor relate to the expulsion and complete abandonment of non-white others? Seeing racism and racialization of different global populations only through the lens of degrees of violence does not allow us to examine how these communities can be positioned and racialized *in relation* to each other, sometimes following different and diverging racial capitalist logics, which yet unfold at the same time.

While the book uses the lens of racial capitalism and locates political economy at the center of the understanding of “Eastern Europeanism,” it overlooks one crucial aspect of “postsocialist transition” – the feminized labor migration from the region. The analysis of the gendered political economy and that of racial capitalism are then produced as two separate matters, thus presenting “Eastern Europeanism” as a gender-neutral phenomenon. The book overlooks the fact that racialization is accomplished through different gendered logics, which go hand in hand with the reproduction of capitalist regimes. In her book *In the Name of Women’s Rights*, Sara Farris (2017) argues that tired tropes of “populism” that see national communities as “us” and migrant others as “them,” are ill-equipped to understand gendered representations and practices of migration. While non-Western migrant men are seen as stealing “Western” jobs and considered a threat, non-Western women are actively recruited and integrated as cheapened care and domestic workers through workfare schemes. This analysis helps in seeing how racialization is always gendered, especially in the context of feminized migration from Europe’s East. Yet, gendered images of women from Central Europe often remain limited to mere references of their portrayals as “*prostitutes*” or “*pretty but desperate local women*” (p. 123), overlooking political economic logics of feminized labor migration to Western Europe with both individual and structural consequences.

THE FALSE BINARY OF EUROWHITE (IL)LIBERALISMS

“Illiberalism” and “illiberal revolt” are two other key terms of the book. Here, Kalmar importantly unpacks the liberal/illiberal binary where hegemonic discourses on Central Europe position the region as “anti-Western.” In fact, as Kalmar argues, white Central Europeans often see themselves as the real, that is, purely white, Europeans and as the last bastion of genuine European civilization (Chapter 5). This argument is an important

contribution to some recent discussions which tend to portray right-wing political formations in Central East Europe as "Eurosceptic," "anti-Western" or exceptional for "Europe." Kalmar (2022: 158) shows that right-wing and far-right political formations in Eastern Europe are not Eurosceptics in any sense and, in fact, fulfill their desires for a white European gated community: *"Central European illiberals are not anti-Western. They do not want the exclusive Western club and its global white hegemony to disappear. They just want to make sure that the club survives long enough to at last accept them."*

The argument might have been pushed even further to unmake the notion of "(il)liberal democracy" altogether. Kalmar often argues that "illiberalism" presents a threat to "liberal democracy." But what is this "liberal democracy," which is equally invested in the maintenance of the global white gated community? It is no accident that the leader of the Italian right-wing Lega Party, Matteo Salvini, called the establishment of a formal alliance of right-wing parties in the European Parliament a *"renaissance"* in Europe (p. 154). When seen as a threat to "liberalism" and "liberal democracy," however, "illiberalism" remains portrayed as an aberration from EU/rope as "an area of freedom, security and justice," which leaves the fantasy of the good, innocent, liberal Europe we should strive for squarely in its place. What remains intact is how, for example, the policing of EU borders is done in the name of "liberal Europe" and protection of the "European garden," and, in fact, exceeds any "Eurosceptic" "illiberal" fantasies.

Instead of referring to (il)liberalism, the book could have made a stronger argument on the region's reproduction of Europe's coloniality since both "liberal" and "illiberal" governments are actively committed to keeping EU/rope as a white gated community.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Kalmar's *White but Not Quite* is a companion to the discussion of race and racialization in Europe, which invites us to move beyond rigid East/West and white/non-white dualities. It gives the reader critical tools that would enable them to continue engaging with the topic while staying cautious towards quick cooptations of critical thought in the name of right-wing victimhood. Examining the workings of whiteness in the region then means recognizing racism in "Central Europe" not merely as a form

of postsocialist resentment against the West but as an active investment in the extension of Europe's colonial and racial politics that predates post-socialism. Future engagement with the topic would also require further attention to how formally "illiberal" governments may not disrupt the "liberal" order but merely continue long normalized racist violence conducted in the name of liberal democracies.

“Quite White” – Central Europeans Beyond Europe

STEPHANIE RUDWICK

In the past few decades, the specific identity politics playing out in Central and Eastern Europe, and specifically the Visegrád countries have been the topic of a broad body of scholarship but hardly any scholar has found as compelling a title for their work as did Ivan Kalmar. *White but Not Quite* is a comprehensive and compelling monograph at the intersections of anthropology, and historical and political science which seeks to offer explanations for the region’s recent resurgence of illiberalism. The monograph’s primary objective is to advance understanding of the roots of the region’s *illiberal revolt*, as Kalmar calls it. Offering a broad socio-historical account of the region, he finds explanations of CEE illiberalism as a reaction to the politics imposed by the West and the attitudes of superiority conveyed through the West.

Unsurprisingly, a central space in the book is reserved for the development in Hungary and Viktor Orbán’s dangerous clinging on to some illusionary purity of the Hungarian nation. While Polish, Slovakian, and Czech politics have seen some similar rejections of migration it also needs to be remembered that the region itself greatly varies as regards religious, socio-economic, and political constellations. But for the most part, Kalmar finds enough nuance to describe important similarities between the countries; without doubt, *White but Not Quite* is a valuable contribution to socio-political scholarship on an understudied region of Europe.

The book decisively has a lot to offer, as Kalmar reviews much important scholarly work and constructs good arguments. However, when it comes to the overarching approach and argument, I have some reservations. While I mostly agree with Kalmar’s ^(2022: 5) assertion that “*central Europe’s failure to become as prosperous and as liberal as the West must be viewed as largely wrought by the invisible hand of intervention by Western-dominated, global market neoliberalism,*” I would probably replace “largely” with “partly.” More importantly, I do not feel entirely comfortable with

the subsequent sentence stating that *“to be blind to this, and instead to blame ‘Eastern European’ backwardness for what is very much the West’s doing, is racist.”*

As I will try to show in this review it is debatable whether the term “racist” is, in fact, a useful term for the analysis of this particular political power dynamic. I concede that this review is a personal account of a German linguistic anthropologist with a decade long residence in Czechia. My doubts about the conceptual framework have their grounding in African Studies and my long residence in South Africa, a country with a history and presence of racial politics par excellence. For sure, from an African Studies perspective the book has strong explanatory limits. While Kalmar is acutely aware of the significance of the historical constructions of race and racism, his monograph conveniently omits the more global history of eugenics in the context of colonialism and Blackness in CEE. The significance of phenotype in the global history of what race is perceived to be and how it is understood, cannot, in my view, be omitted in a study that conceptualizes race.

THE LIMITS OF RACE AS AN EXPLANATORY TOOL

While the initial chapters of the book make for an interesting historical discussion of the complex identity trajectories of CEE people, I find the extensive description of 19th and 20th century geopolitics as having to do more with East and West dynamics than with a history of racial formations and understandings. Chapter III ends with a compelling last paragraph in which Kalmar (2022: 104) states that *“through the many transformations of the Central European idea, from German Mitteleuropa, through socialism with a human face, to the illiberal rhetoric of the ordinary white man as victim, what has continued is the resurgent desire to make Central Europe central to Europe.”* Here, I concur with Kalmar’s (IBID.) argument that there is *“a desire to lead in a club to which one has not even been fully admitted.”* For sure, I have encountered various forms of the *“inferiority complex”* and the *“illiberal revolt,”* as Kalmar calls it, and these dynamics might well have their root in a feeling of *“not quite”* being.

However, framing all this through the prism of race is problematic in my view because Eastern Europeans themselves hold on to constructions

of whiteness that have long been disposed of in the West. In fact, in many if not most Western European countries black people with European roots are no longer seen as aliens and strangers. For example, to be black and French is certainly not considered an oxymoron in French mainstream society. While this can be explained through colonialism and does not mean in any way that racism is not part of Western societies, it suggests that engagement with and acceptance of racial diversity within the nation state already has a long history. And the corresponding situation, I would like to argue, is very different in the CEE region, where a narrative of “colonial exceptionalism” persists and many, if not most, citizens grapple with embracing a non-white individual as a fellow citizen. This is illustrated through recent research in Poland and Czechia (E.G., BALOGUN 2020, 2023A; BALOGUN – JOSEPH-SALISBURY 2021; OHIA-NOWAK 2016, 2020; RUDWICK – SCHMIEDL 2023; RUDWICK 2023; RUDWICK – SIMUZIYA 2023) which demonstrates that in those countries, whiteness continues to be so hegemonically constructed that citizens of color are routinely discriminated against. It is indeed paradoxical that societies which perhaps can be constructed as being seen as “not quite white” within one framework can be observed as striving to, in fact, stay “whiter” than those societies which might ascribe to them the “not quite white” status.

While Kalmar acknowledges that “*Eastern Europeanism*” is not comparable in severity to the racisms that originated in colonial oppression, he nonetheless sees Eastern Europeanism as similar. After all, he writes about the treating of “*Central Europeans and others in or from post-communist Europe as a different and inferior breed*” (p. 5). Even if this is de facto experienced as such, I cannot help wondering why “race” should be the best explanatory tool in analyzing these power dynamics among white Europeans. From my perspective, Kalmar’s analysis only holds up if kept within this restricted West-East European context, while outside of the continent, Central and Eastern Europeans are mostly seen within a framework of quite “normative” white privilege. To make this point clearer, I would like to refer to the inextricable connection between race and colorism. Central and Eastern European people are phenotypically white and far from not quite white in most places in the world. In South Africa, for instance, people from CEE are unambiguously categorized as “fully” white and see themselves unmistakably as such.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF RACE AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

While race and its constructions are fluid, I would like to stress that fluidity in one context can also mean fixity in another. To be fair, Kalmar ^(2022: 7) does urge the reader not to misunderstand or interpret his writing as relativizing anti-Black racism and equating it with Central or Eastern European victimhood. However, he also continues to argue that the same system that produces such radical racial oppositions as White and Black or colonizer and colonized, also produces ambiguous positions of partial privilege coexisting with oppression, such as “Eastern European” (which subsumes Central Europeans). I concur that ambiguity is doubtlessly a central element in conceptualizing race, but it is also true that racial hierarchy is much more complicated than Kalmar makes it out to be and phenotype is far from insignificant here.

To make the above point more tangible I draw from my own participant observation in the CEE region in relation to the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian war. For sure, there was a very broad Central European solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees, at least at the outbreak of the war; this was partly so because Ukrainians were widely “seen” and accepted as white refugees. Multiple international news platforms, however, reported on the segregation and discrimination of black refugees at the borders of CEE countries, in particular, Poland ^(BALOGUN 2023A). Given that the broad solidarity did not so much extend towards refugees who were people of color, phenotypical whiteness unambiguously emerged as an essential criterion for the acceptance of Ukrainian refugee status. The link between race and colorism simply matters and not acknowledging the significance of phenotype is, from my perspective, tantamount to obstructing social justice. Of course, Kalmar does not fall into this trap; he rightly recognizes, as mentioned before, that racism experienced by people of color is far more severe than racism against Eastern Europeans. And indeed, Kalmar also delivers a convincing analysis throughout many parts of the book. And yet, from my perspective, the study only holds up within Europe and among white Europeans because as soon as we start taking people of color seriously into consideration, the framework becomes shaky and globally insufficient.

As for the methodological grounding of the book, I cannot help feeling a little disappointed. As an anthropologist, I utterly appreciate that Kalmar writes about his own identity trajectory and his sense of belonging to the Central and Eastern part of the world in the postscript. Apart from this, however, he is not particularly transparent in terms of his actual empirical research among the people in the region or his own positioning. Unless I missed it in the book, there is not much transparency and even less critical interrogation of the “*locus of enunciation*” (GROSFOGUEL 2011: 6). Given that Kalmar is affiliated to a highly prestigious North American institution and, as a result, is inevitably influenced by an Anglo-American approach in his analysis, I personally would have welcomed a more profound critical introspection and discussion of his own positionality. It is a bit paradoxical that in a sense Kalmar deprives the CEE populations of agency in their own illiberalism due to the dominance of the West but, at the same time, he employs in his analysis of the in-between space that CEE constitutes the conceptual toolkit of racial capitalism which is firmly grounded in global North paradigms.¹

Linked to this point are also further questions of methodology that arise. Given his disciplinary grounding, I am wondering whether there was in fact any ethnography in his research at any point, or in other words, any “deep hanging out,” as we anthropologists like to call it. Were there systematic interviews with Central and Eastern Europeans? How do the minutiae of everyday life play out in relation to the broader political dynamics we see analyzed in the book? Many of the arguments throughout the monograph are substantiated on the basis of quantitative data, which are not always displayed in a consistent way. From an anthropological perspective, narratives of lived experiences would have benefitted the analysis and perhaps drawn attention to the fact that the way “race” operates in multiple ways in the CEE region goes far above and beyond the “white but not quite” framework. Kalmar (2022: 56) uses, for instance, something as obscure as a Quora thread in order to discuss whether Eastern Europeans are believed to have distinct racial features. It surprises me that as a seasoned anthropologist, he does not deliver an ethnographic perspective. Despite all its limits, an ethnographic perspective shows how multiple dynamics of power and disempowerment constitute peoples’ self- and other ascribed identities. Where are the minutiae of everyday life from Hungary, Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia?

If we conceptualize Eastern Europeanism as racism, would it then not also make sense to provide evidence of Central and Eastern Europeans themselves conceptualizing their experiences as instances of explicit racism? Regrettably, I do not find much evidence for this in the book. Kalmar (2022: 10) himself emphasizes that as anthropologists “*we insist on respecting the insider perspective of the people we study.*” So why is there so little reference to Central Europeans’ lived experience of an explicitly racist Eastern Europeanism? Admittedly, I am not in a position to argue that Czech, Slovak, Polish and Hungarian people do not experience the Western arrogance as “racist” but in order to accept it as such, I would like to be shown some evidence from qualitative sources.

VICTIM OR PERPETRATOR?

A related point to consider is the victim-perpetrator binary. One can, of course, be both, even at the same time, and in my understanding the flagging of one’s victimized racial positioning can flare flames of hatred and potentially make one a still more ardent perpetrator of racism against those who are slotted at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. For instance, in a recent article (RUDWICK – SCHMIEDL 2023) we show that Czech football enthusiasts tend to highlight their own victimized positioning within Europe on social media rather than recognizing the problem of racism against black players in their own rows. Kalmar, I am sure, does not in any way want to relativize racism against African people through his approach, but I think he would do well in eliciting opinions among CEE residents of color. It simply worries me that one would primarily frame Central and Eastern European whites as the victims of Western racism while quite atrocious everyday racism is experienced by people of color all over Europe.

So once again, I am wondering just how useful it is to frame Eastern Europeanism as racist. To be sure, the dynamic, which, no doubt, is seriously discriminatory, ought to be addressed. But to what extent is it really productive to conceptualize power dynamics between white people – who altogether hold a decent amount of privilege – as racist per se? If we acknowledged, which Kalmar does, that illiberalism is a global force and analyzed every power dynamic along a racial capitalist framework, it would probably mean that any elitist urban intellectual who is dismissing someone from the ultra-right could also be framed as racist. But is this

really fruitful? What happened to class stratification and the urban-rural divide? Personally, and as an African Studies scholar, I would argue that race as a concept has a very limited explanatory power in such macro politics. Why should the global North framework of racial capitalism rule in the analysis of power dynamics between different nations?

If we adopt such a broad lens on racism, then any discrimination can be framed as racism. Kalmar ^(2022: 41) dichotomizes the *"race as a matter of looks or phenotype"* approach with the common social science approach to race, which sees it *"as the result of socioeconomic factors, particularly under capitalism"* but the construction of this binary restricts his own perspective. As a result, he fails to mention that most social constructionist understandings have not abandoned giving significance to phenotype. From my perspective, there is not sufficient theoretical and conceptual engagement with race as a category of human belonging from a socio-historical and global perspective in this book. Kalmar does, however, discuss the specific European West-East divide in a compelling and nuanced way. It is welcome, for instance, how Kalmar charges the West with racism against Central and Eastern Europeans on page 45 because of course the negative attitudes towards CEE people in Western Europe are a reality and need to be addressed.

Kalmar ^(2022: 197) himself recognizes that the CEE region has historically benefitted and continues to benefit from Western imperialism. This is a context I consider paramount in discussing the paradox of the whiteness that might be felt as not being "quite enough" and the whiteness that strives to maintain the idea of being a kind of white that is whiter than the West in terms of actual human diversity that I referred to earlier. As a German person living in Czechia for more than a decade, I have close experience with political discussions where illiberalism plays out in direct opposition to, for instance, the increasingly multicultural and multiracial German society. My own participant observation in these debates gives testimony to a common Czech narrative: that such multiracialism is not desired, and that Czech society, as a whole, prides itself on its sense of now being "purer" than the "watered down" Germans. Is it not, again ironically, a nice antidote to Kalmar's meticulous discussion of Nazism in the book? Much of the general discussion in the book focuses, unsurprisingly, on the pitting of Russia against the West as the extreme pole in a binary matrix.

However, the identities of Russians do not receive much attention in the book, which makes me wonder about the following question: if CEE people are not quite white, what are Russians, then? Not at all white? Does the racial framework really work here, or are geopolitical binaries and discussions of in-betweenness not more useful after all?

ENDNOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Daniel Šitera and Zuzana Uhde for helping me refine my thinking here.

Central Europe: Racialized or Elusive?

ALIAKSEI KAZHARSKI

Ivan Kalmar's ⁽²⁰²²⁾ recent book is an impressive contribution to the ongoing debate on Central Europe, the East-West relations in the European Union, and the shifting images of Central and Eastern Europe in the West. In my opinion, the most vital theme of the book is the argument about "Eastern Europeanism," which I discuss below. Professor Kalmar argues that "Eastern Europeanism" is a form of *racism*, but it is a racism that is not directly tied to the "phenotype" (i.e., skin color), and hence the witty title of the book.

For sure this phenomenon is linked to the recent democratic backsliding in the EU's post-Communist new member states and the rise of so-called *illiberalism*, an ideology espoused by corrupt and hybrid or partially authoritarian political regimes such as that of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Without neglecting to discuss that obvious connection, the author insists on seeing a much broader context set by the *semi-peripheral* position of Central Europe in the regional/global division of labor. Thus, the author points out the need to link the analysis of identitarian and ideological discourses to materialist analytical frameworks inspired by the works of neo-Marxist scholars like Immanuel Wallerstein ⁽²⁰⁰⁰⁾ with his world systems theory. And even though, empirically speaking, this book does not take us very far in that direction, I believe this to be a promising project.

The book contains many sharp insights into Central Europe with which I wholeheartedly agree. Discussing all of them would take the essay too far beyond its word limit, and this is why below, I concentrate mostly on points that, in my opinion, leave some room for conceptual debate.

However, what I find to be the most crucial contribution of the book is the critical analysis of "Eastern Europeanism" as a new form of *crude binarization* that divides Europe, in a dichotomous manner, into the "democratic West" and the "authoritarian" and "backward East." A brilliant example of such critical analysis can be found in Chapter 4, where Professor Kalmar discusses the "*half-truths*" about Central Europe. This is where

the author demonstrates how the fashion in which the results of regional opinion polls are published and visualized through maps by the American Pew Research Center, can contribute to promoting simplistic dichotomies rather than to developing more nuanced understandings. Such simplifying images can make it easier to forget that neither the “West” nor the “East” is homogeneous in terms of the distribution of public attitudes, thus allowing the black and white to eclipse the fifty shades of gray.

GOING BEYOND SIMPLISTIC METHODOLOGIES

This is where Professor Kalmar’s argument once again points us in the direction of a very important research agenda that will have to be explored in the years to come. Sadly, binarizations and dichotomous representations seem to be inevitable in the mass media discourse because of the way in which information is served and consumed. In other words, there is a political economy to it. *Inter alia* this has been visible in the discourse on “authoritarianism” and “democratic backsliding” in the Visegrád Four (V4) in recent years, as Hungary and Poland were regularly lumped together despite the obvious differences in the extent to which fair political competition and the “level playing field” were preserved in the two countries.

Naturally, the public bromance between Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán, and their declarations of ideological affinity and calls for a “cultural counter-revolution” had to contribute to this effect. Yet, discourses – self-designations included – are but one dimension of political analysis. In relation to this, I find it worth it to mull over one point that caught my attention as I was reading Professor Kalmar’s discussion of the terminology. Thus, he writes on page 8: *“I prefer ‘illiberalism’ over such terms as ‘populism’, for one thing because as an anthropologist I respect the terms the groups I study use themselves.”*

That is a very generous approach indeed. However, would it also mean that we need to buy into Orbán’s designation of his political regime (“illiberal democracy”) as a *democracy* when we know for a fact that the level playing field in Hungary has been subverted and political competition emasculated, and the Hungarian parliamentary elections may still be free, but they are no longer *fair*? (OSCE 2022). The same goes for other similar manipulative terms such as the earlier Putinist construct of “sovereign

democracy,” from which Orbán “copy-pasted” massively, for a systematic comparison see [\(KAZHARSKI – MACALOVÁ 2020\)](#). And what about more notorious self-designations, such as *das Herrenvolk*? All this leaves me wondering about the limits of this generous approach to terminology in political science.

Having said that, I am also generally sympathetic to Kalmar’s treatment of “Central Europe” as an open project into which it is possible to inscribe oneself rather than as a fixed geographical entity. Thus, whilst he considers the Visegrád Four the undisputable “core” of Central Europe understood in the “*narrowest geographical sense*” Kalmar [\(2022: 9\)](#) admits that “*Ukrainians and Belarusians who want closer ties to the West would include themselves [in “Central Europe”], too.*” This subject returns us to the recurrent discussions of the regional geopolitical imaginaries, of who belongs and who does not belong to a particular region, and of the ways in which we draw borders – also through our own writing.

In this respect, Professor Kalmar’s approach is somewhere halfway between the social constructivist paradigm and an *ad hoc* method. Understandably, the “viewpoint” format of the book does not leave room for abstract theoretical deliberations. However, every now and then, this approach also yields certain ambiguities and inconsistencies, such as on page 97, where “*the people of the Visegrád Four countries*” are said to “*generally consider themselves to be more Western than predominantly Orthodox nations like Ukrainians, Russians, Serbs, Romanians, or Bulgarians.*”

What makes me question this new dichotomy is not so much the results of the more recent opinion polls in places like Slovakia, which do not rhyme very well with it as the collective identification with the West there is observed to be far from unambiguous [\(SEE HAJDU ET AL. 2022\)](#). Rather, it is the distinctly Huntingtonian flavor about the term “predominantly Orthodox nations.” Indeed, it is not clear why one would find this distinction useful, considering that in some of the said nations only around 5–8% have been known to be regular churchgoers [\(EVANS – NORTHMORE-BALL 2012\)](#) and traditional religion does not seem to play a significant role in people’s lives. For the author of the infamous “clash of civilizations” thesis, religion was one easy way to draw hasty dividing lines but it is unclear why good social science would want to buy into this sketchy reasoning.

DOES CENTRAL EUROPE EXIST?

In the end, it is, perhaps, impossible to escape ambiguities when drawing the line between “Eastern” and “Central Europe,” and the use of categories very much depends on the analyst’s perspective, which is shaped both by their personal background and by the situational context of the analysis. In the words of Milada Anna Vachudova, the post-1989 Visegrád Group was “*first and foremost a triumph of marketing: the term ‘the Visegrád group’ became shorthand for the politically and economically most advanced, most ‘Western’ post-communist states*” (VACHUDOVA 2005: 94). Implicitly at least, this exercise in “Central Europeanness” could mean othering and even exclusion not only of Russia, as in Milan Kundera’s seminal 1984 essay, but also of other post-Soviet and post-Communist states to the geographical East and South of the V4 (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, IORDACHI 2012).

Today, as we are approaching the twentieth anniversary of the 2004 climax in the V4 “marketing triumph,” the dichotomy of “Central and Eastern” (or, perhaps, Central *at the expense* of Eastern) Europe may look somewhat less convincing. It is not just that in 2022, only 34% in Slovakia seemed to be convinced that their country should belong in the West rather than “somewhere in between” or to the East. In 2021, prior to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, this count of “Westernizers” was reported to be even lower (26%) (SEE HAJDU ET AL. 2022), also for an academic reflection (ČANJÍ 2023). If we forget about geopolitical imaginaries for a moment, then in terms of any honest analysis, in comparison to Hungary, that one time “Central European” star pupil of transition, representative democracy is obviously doing much better not only in the de-occupied “post-Soviet” Baltic States but even in the now war-torn Ukraine, where the incumbents have been regularly defeated in democratic elections. So much for the general “*difference between Central and the rest of Eastern Europe*” (p. 145).

All these observations raise questions about the meaning of the said term and the extent to which it can be useful as an analytical category that can be disentangled from geopolitical myths and instrumentalized narratives. Professor Kalmar’s generous “anthropological” approach to self-designations implies treating the V4 unconditionally as the “core” of Central Europe, as its primary *signified*. This is a convenient shorthand of which I am also very much guilty (E.G., KAZHARSKI 2022A).

At the same time, I also believe that social science can also be done without drawing boundaries in the geographical manner. Professor Kalmar (2022: 66) makes a very interesting observation to the effect that the post-WW2 expulsion of the Germans from CEE sealed the geopolitical imaginaries in the sense that it was now “possible for the first time to imagine East Central Europe as unambiguously ‘Eastern European.’”

I would say there are two ways to look at this: not only is CEE inalienable from the German cultural legacy but the Germans themselves, at least up to a certain point, were very much a “Central/Eastern” European nation that was shaped by the same very well recognizable peripheral complexes as everyone else on the spectrum, from Hungary to Russia. Thus, Friedrich Naumann’s initial project of Central Europe (*Mittleuropa*) is part of the effort to escape the European margin by establishing Germany as a peer of the “West” – a concern or complex that is quite typical for the whole region. In this sense Central/Eastern Europeanness is nothing but “transitive peripherality,” if I am allowed to play a bit on Professor Kalmar’s (2022: 183) clever term “*transitive Orientalism*.”

Finally, in this context, it is also impossible not to point to the emergent link in the chain of semantic mutations that the “*idea of Central Europe*” has been undergoing, see for a comprehensive overview (DHAND 2018). Thus, the new ideologues of “*Central Europeanness*” have worked to redefine it by juxtaposing it to being Western, breaking with the Kundera-inspired post-1989 interpretation of Central Europe as a severed Western limb, which once underpinned the “applicant state narrative” (MOISIO 2002). This has been happening not only in Hungary (SEE BALOGH 2017), which is the usual suspect in that regard, but also in Czechia (E.G., TĚRA 2022), although in the latter case it is, of course, much further from becoming the official mainstream position.

THE RISKS OF CONCEPTUAL OVERSTRETCH

Leaving geopolitical imaginaries aside, I would focus on two more aspects of Professor Kalmar’s book that have left me pondering. The first one also pertains to terminology. The witty title of the book is not a mere figure of speech. The author uses “racism” as an analytical category to examine the practices of East-West othering and exclusion in Europe. In this case

it is understood as a “non-phenotype” breed of racism that essentializes people not on the basis of their skin color but – if I understand correctly – based on their ethnicity/nationality, geographical origin, and their place in Europe’s division of labor.

On the one hand, it is certainly useful to reflect on whether our commonsensical understanding of racism has not become too US-centric (or West-centric), underpinned by the North American experience and/or the Western European maritime imperialism. The overall usage of the term has historically been broader, so, for instance, when Robert William Seton-Watson, also known as Scotus Viator ⁽¹⁹⁰⁸⁾, wrote his *Racial Problems in Hungary* he certainly was not referring to problems revolving around the differences in skin color.

Furthermore, these possible reconceptualizations of racism are closely linked to the very important discussions on decolonization sparked by the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine ^(SEE MÄLKSOO 2022). Central and Eastern European critical scholars have long pondered on how the theoretical apparatus of postcolonial studies can be applied to analyzing Russian colonialism in their region ^(SEE RIABCHUK 2013). Its various supremacist practices have included, *inter alia*, the traditional marginalization of the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages as “peasant” dialects, as some *Untersprachen* incapable of begetting anything even remotely resembling “the great Russian culture.” In Mykola Riabchuk’s ⁽²⁰²¹⁾ words this was (and still is) the situation of the subalterns having “white skin [but] black language.”

On the other hand, if one were to engage in such reconceptualizations in an academic manner, one would of course need clear definitions of race and racism that would take them *beyond the phenotype*. In his text, Professor Kalmar does offer such a definition, formulated by Geraldine Heng. Heng ^(AS CITED IN KALMAR 2022: 38) suggests that racism is about: “... a repeating tendency [...] to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment.”

There is no doubt that through its history, humankind has convincingly demonstrated that it is a very hierarchical and oppressive animal. However, it remains unclear from the presented definition *which differences* have to be used to construct race and, consequently, what makes racial difference distinct in the universe of cases, isolating it from alternative forms of supremacist othering, let us say, for example, from *gendered* ones.

As Professor Kalmar ^(2022: 7) points out, some authors prefer to speak of “*chauvinism[,] not racism.*” If we were to disagree with them, we would need to somehow specify the open definition provided above. Otherwise, I am afraid we might be facing the danger of a conceptual overstretch, and the analytical value added of grouping several different contexts under one conceptual roof can remain unclear, especially considering that the divergences between them are also not insignificant. After all, as Professor Kalmar ^(IBID.: 206) himself indicates, “Eastern Europeanism” implies one key difference: “*If you’re not too Eastern European, if you speak excellent English, dress and eat like a Westerner, if you are able to share topics and opinions in a way that fits the expectations of Western society, then you have a fair chance of being accepted, personally, as an equal. Your children born in the West will in most cases pass without even having to try.*”

This stands in notable contrast to the conventional postcolonial situation where skin color can be the basis of that insurmountable difference which ensures that “*equality is promised, but delayed forever*” ^(IBID.: 194).

From my side I could, perhaps, provide an alternative and much narrower usage for the term “racism” which would also take it beyond the “phenotype.” I would point in the direction of those discourses that use nativist, pseudobiological notions to essentialize people, such as when the Russian rulers shock the public with their talk about Volodymyr Zelenskyi and “*Hitler’s Jewish blood,*” see for a brief analysis ^(KAZHARSKI 2022B) or when some Ukrainian internet commentators refer to Russians as “orcs” or “*a horde of genetic slaves.*” These primordialist discourses are very much alive and well in the Eastern parts of Europe, and in their references to pseudobiological notions, they are not unlike the 19th century racial doctrines.

The alternative would be to stay with the open definition, but when applied, it would lead us into a very fuzzy notion. Notably, Professor

Kalmar ^(2022: 73) subsumes prejudices between the former West and East Germans (*“die Ossis”*) under *“Eastern Europeanist racism,”* even though in this instance we are clearly looking at different geographies and political experiences but, by and large, one ethnies. Whether *race* and *racism* are still the best categories for critical analysis here remains very much an open question for me.

In connection with this there is a second point I would raise about the argument developed in the book. Professor Kalmar’s common denominator for different guises of racism lies in political economy. It is capitalism and the *“capital’s need for cheap labor and compliant markets”* that spurs racism ^(2022: 23). This logic is also used to explain the phrase *“white but not quite”*; i.e., the Central Europeans’ *“partially privileged”* racial status is preserved by their semi-peripheral position in the regional division of labor – as seen in terms of Wallerstein’s ⁽²⁰⁰⁰⁾ famous world-systems analysis.

I certainly agree with both the political-economic situating of Central Europe in the semi-periphery (*“base”*) and the assessment of the ambiguous cultural status of Central Europeans (*“superstructure”*), although this is where I would also differ from Professor Kalmar by talking about norms and identities rather than about races and racism. At the same time, connecting these two (the *“base”* and the *“superstructure”*) in a causal manner remains but an interesting hypothesis without empirical support – which it does not receive in the book.

Criticism of capitalist relations is somewhat of a hegemonic discourse in North American universities and the *“amoral essence of capitalism”* ^(KALMAR 2022: 123) is a doxa among the left-leaning academics. Perhaps, they are right, but with respect to the specific case in question, I would also love to see some empirics. If the Central Europeans are, indeed, deliberately held back from becoming fully *“Western,”* then who is doing it, where, and how – which social actors and through which social mechanisms? This is an empirical sociological question.

On a related note, I also have questions about the political-economic aspects of the purported Western *“colonialism”* in Central Europe. Professor Kalmar ^(2022: 200) writes about *“a quasi-colonial takeover of Central Europe by the West”* that is, in turn, exploited by the right-wing populists

who hijack the anti-colonial rhetoric. The prefix “quasi-” is rather handy when one engages in writing that is heavily embellished by figures of speech, but in academic terms, it leaves too much ambiguity, which good social science normally wishes to avoid. Something is either “colonial” or it is not. Otherwise, the term stops being convenient as an analytical category and creates much room for its manipulative use that results in what Professor Kalmar calls the “*perverted parlance*” of the populists (2022: 199).

CONCLUSION

I would finish by highlighting something that is potentially much more significant than these conceptual debates. From the point of view of its form, Professor Kalmar’s book is brilliantly written and absolutely captivating. Though it is a “viewpoint” rather than a “research” text, its style, its anecdotes, and the intimate personal connection to the region can perhaps communicate more than a dozen articles that are grounded in elaborate theory.

In particular, this concerns those readers who are new to the Central European topics. While the regular narrations of the basics of regional history in the text may seem excessive to someone who is from or working on Central Europe, they will be indispensable to the newcomers. Professor Kalmar’s modesty does not allow him to start the book with the dramatic and fascinating story of his family, which is a true mirror of the history of the region! Instead, the book opens with the story of another Central European, whose biography is, for sure, also something of an epitome when it comes to the contemporary regional developments. Overall, these qualities of the book make it a wonderful introduction to the region, which is certain to stimulate an avid interest in and promote further international debate about Central Europe.

Race in Central Europe: A Rejoinder

IVAN KALMAR

In the four Central European countries I focus on – Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary – the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 meant to most people that they would be “returning” to Europe and the West. In the words of the well-known author Milan Kundera (1984), Central Europeans were “several nations who had always considered themselves Western” and had been “kidnapped” east by Soviet Russia. Now they were ready to come home.

If they hoped to be welcomed back as long-lost family, though, they were soon to be disappointed. Many in the West saw them as too different, too backward, too “Eastern European.” Worse, communism seemed to have incubated in them the demons of the past that the West felt it had overcome successfully: a heritage of authoritarianism and racism, including especially antisemitism. Such folks could not easily rise to the level of a free Western society. Even if they reluctantly tried to climb up on the slippery pole of liberal democracy, they were bound to “backslide.”

In *White But Not Quite*, I detail and reject such othering and inferiorizing discourses about Eastern Europeans. I call them “Eastern Europeanism,” and suggest that they are a form of racism. To explain the illiberal revolt in the area, I choose not to attribute it to some allegedly innate anti-democratic, inherently Eastern European character. Rather, I place it in the global context of a misguided rebellion that has engulfed many other groups as well.

I believe that illiberalism in Central Europe is part of a worldwide revolt against the brutal policies of unbridled neoliberalism that engulfed the world towards the end of the twentieth century. Though they claimed the fall of communism in 1989 as their greatest geopolitical triumph, these policies caused upheaval, and subsequently resentment, in the more peripheral areas of the world. I rely for my analysis on the concept of “racial capitalism,” as developed by Cedric Robinson (2020; SEE ALSO BHATTACHARYYA 2018; JENKINS – LEROY 2021). As I wrote elsewhere (KALMAR 2023: 1465), “*Racial capitalism requires that the subaltern periphery, providing cheap labour and new*

markets, be placed behind an imagined racial barrier, so that the full protection of the liberal state is not extended to it.” The most obvious example is colonization during the height of Western imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Western powers installed and protected an unequal economy and rationalized it by racializing discourses, which suggested that the subordination of the colonized was due to their race. The brown and black people in the colonies were deemed congenitally incapable of effectively accumulating capital, and thus developing a prosperous capitalist economy on their own. In *White But Not Quite*, I suggest that a similar coupling of economic subordination and racialization has applied also to the “Eastern enlargement” of the EU.

I conclude that “[t]he real, if partial, similarities between the postcolonial and the post-communist condition [...] offer an opportunity for Central Europeans to understand, empathize, and cultivate solidarity with people in and from the Global South” (p. 226). I note, however, that “few have answered the call.” Illiberal Central Europeans choose instead to distance themselves from the postcolony, and assert their precarious claim to privilege as native-born “Europeans” and “Christians,” but such claims are thinly disguised, if disguised at all, references to being White.

In this, Central Europeans resemble others in what I call the “white periphery” in the West, as in parts of the American rustbelt or the French countryside. The relation between the white periphery and the core of capital accumulation in the glitzy cities of the West is one that is partially captured by Wallerstein’s (1976) term “*semi-periphery*.” Racial capitalism produces several iterations of peripheralization, at different scales. At the highest, global, scale is the peripheralization inherited from classic imperialism, that between the (post)colonizer of the Global North and the postcolony of the Global South. But because capital accumulation, and exclusion from it, take place at every scale, there are peripheralizations, and accompanying racial otherings, also *within* the global core (and within the global periphery).

In racial capitalism, the Western core as a whole is racialized as white. But the internal peripheralization of Eastern Europeans within the Western core effectively makes them less than fully so. This is what I mean by “white but not quite.” In response, the illiberal revolt of the white

periphery, including by white Central Europeans, is a misguided revolt against their demotion within the white core to a white-but-not-quite internal periphery. They refuse solidarity with the even more deeply othered global peripheries, and instead demand the restoration in the West of uncompromising white privilege, so that they can fully participate in it.

Not everyone in Central Europe is equally open to joining this illiberal revolt. The main supporters are found among groups whose interests are most impacted by globalization, and who stand most to benefit from the protection of the nation state. These, I argue, include some workers and small business people near but not at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as well as owners and managers of capital engaged in largely local activities, such as construction or resource extraction. I speak of an *“alliance between the very rich and the not-so-poor”* (pp. 26, 244).

Such, in sum, is my approach to explaining illiberalism in Central Europe. It locates the illiberal revolt among some Central Europeans as a specific instance of a misguided response around the world to the late twentieth-century phase of global neoliberalism and its continuing effects. In Central Europe, it is also a response to the racism against Eastern Europeans that intensified with the fall of the communist regimes, as global neoliberalism engulfed the area.

In what follows, I flesh out this summary, with attention to the comments offered by the four reviewers. No reviewer can be expected to address all aspects of the book, if only because of limitations of space, and perhaps I can be excused also if I do not address all elements in all the reviews. What I would like to focus on are two questions that have been raised by some of the reviewers and which have also been frequently raised by other readers of the book. Why use race to explain the tensions of the East-West relationship that I discuss? And why insist on separating Central Europe from Eastern Europe?

WHY RACE

We may accept Eastern Europeanism as a fact, but also ask if it would not be better to call it something else. Might “xenophobia” or “regional intolerance” not do better? Why speak of racism? Nesting within this general

question is a more specific one: Is it right to speak of racism by whites against whites?

Reviewers Aliaksei Kazharski and Stephanie Rudwick both question my use of “race” in this context, though Rudwick does so more emphatically. In her formulation, race is a matter of phenotype. This is not my position, but in fact if we were to ask if the “Eastern European” imagined by Eastern Europeanism is a phenotype, then the answer is yes. On page 55, I quote a number of Quora users who say that Eastern European men’s heads are flat at the back, and that their faces are rounder, among other things. One user reflects a common refrain when he says that these features are due to the Mongolian invasion of the Middle Ages. I relate such comments to the long history of regarding Slavs as “*semi-Asiatic*” (p. 57).

Reading such facts might have convinced Rudwick that the East-West European differences are properly racial even according to her own, phenotype-dependent definition of race. That it did not, suggests that what Rudwick means by phenotypical difference is restricted to epidermic difference: a difference in skin color. This was the legal definition of race in the Jim Crow era United States and in apartheid South Africa. But we are not obliged to follow the apartheid regime’s essentializing of race, a social construct, as if it were given by nature through the biology of human pigmentation.

That, to be fair, is not Rudwick’s argument. She and others who object to my use of “race” in this context do have at least one debatable point. I think it is often a good choice to use terms the way they are used in ordinary language, and “race” is not used in ordinary English and other languages today to label white Eastern Europeans. It was different in the past. Much of Chapter 1 is taken up by explaining how racism began in Europe and was not particularly concerned with skin color. To those who insist on differentiating between race and ethnicity, I invoke the African-American scholar Thomas Holt (2000: 17), who quipped that “[r]ace is something blacks have; ethnicity belongs to whites.” Cedric Robinson (2020: 2), too, was adamant that racism was not necessarily about skin color, and that its origins were in Europe: “*Racism, I maintain, was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the ‘internal’ relations of European peoples.*”

Well into the 20th century, it was still normal to speak of the “English race” or the “Hungarian race.” In German, and in the four Central European languages I deal with (which have been decisively influenced by German), to be sure, the linguistically closest equivalent of “race,” *Rasse*, would not be used in that context; one would probably use *Volk*. *Rasse* was more of a pseudoscientific term. It, no more than *Volk*, however, confined itself to phenotype. Antisemites, including the Nazis, spoke of the Jews as a *Rasse* and theorized their own Aryan superiority in terms of a supposed *Rassenkunde* (racial science), while they discussed their ban on miscegenation and eventually their murder of Jews as *Rassenhygiene* (racial hygiene). But, contrary to what some perhaps believe, the German National Socialists never described the Jews as not white. At the other side of the ocean, in the meantime, according to Bernasconi (2014), “racism” was used as a term in order to describe antisemitism before the term was widely employed to target anti-Black actions and prejudice. That the racial difference between Blacks and Whites became the prototypical racial difference in many languages, happened no doubt under the influence of racist legislation in the US and in South Africa. Legal restrictions there indexed what at least in those regions was the most basic racial boundary in racial capitalism.

Yet for whatever reason, the fact is that “race” has come to signify, in ordinary language, mainly the black/white contrast. So in the interest of accessibility (which for me is always a major goal), might it not be advisable to stay with that narrow, epidermic definition of race, unless there are compelling reasons to re-extend its purview?

I think that such reasons do exist. To confine the term “race” to epidermis obscures more than it reveals. The term “ethnic group” or even “nation,” does not identify anything different from “race,” unless we are talking about taxonomic hierarchies, so that “Czech” is an “ethnic group” within the white “race.” But what I address in the book – racism against Eastern Europeans – is not at the scale of national ethnic groups, but rather of supranational populations. Eastern Europeans may not be normally spoken of as a race, but they are also never represented as a (single) ethnic group or nation. To speak of them as such confuses things beyond where they can be usefully sorted out in terms of global and European relations under capitalism. Since such relations are my concern, to speak in my book of race provides clarity that “ethnicity” does not. It reveals that

Eastern Europeanism, as much as epidermic racism, is a product of racial capitalism.

Using race to explain capitalism in Europe is not an act of importing, as some may believe, an American or perhaps “Anglo-Saxon” issue onto the European continent, where it does not belong. On the contrary, it is bringing it back to where it came from. Some people regard Europe as the home of a civilization that has overcome its colonizing heritage, and relegate that colonial past to irrelevant dustbins of history. Wekker ⁽²⁰¹⁶⁾ has called the Dutch variety of this denialism “*white innocence*.” However, the migration of millions of people of color from the former colonies has made professions of white innocence, and, by extension, inattention to race, much more difficult in Western Europe. In comparison, although Central Europe is also receiving increasing numbers of immigrants from outside Europe, they still only represent a trickle compared to the West. So it has become common for some Central Europeans to deny that *they*, as opposed to Western Europeans, ever had anything to do with colonization. This differentiation from Western Europe is one of the cornerstones of Central European anti-migration rhetoric, and increases the region’s alienation from Brussels.

The protestation of colonial innocence by Central Europeans, which I discuss at length in the book, is, however, based on fiction. It was not only the countries and regions that politically controlled overseas colonies that benefitted from the Western domination of them, or articulated the White supremacist rhetoric of imperialism. Central Europe did, too. Contrary to Daria Krivonos’ remarks, I recognize Central Europe’s historic role in the “*extension of Europe’s colonial and racial politics*.” In fact, I devote an entire section of the book to it, entitled “*So, is Central Europe responsible for colonialism?*”, which I answer with a resolute “*yes*” (pp. 221–226). The refusal to acknowledge the complicity and responsibility of Central Europe in colonialism is problematized extensively, if informally, also in Chapter 9, where I recall the rhetoric around racist incidents during and after several international football matches.

WHY CENTRAL EUROPE

Referring to East-West relations in Europe as racial clears up avenues of research that allow us to locate race in Central Europe in a full global context, reaching beyond the boundaries of the continent. Before we can widen our scope beyond Europe, however, it is essential to first break the problematic of race and illiberalism in Central Europe out of the confining mold of an approach that locates it in an essentialized, uniform, and undifferentiated “Eastern Europe.”

This does not mean that different instances of racialization are the same, either within Europe or elsewhere.¹ Though all of Europe was involved in colonialism and benefited from white privilege, the racial contract discussed by Mill (2022); see also (BALOGUN 2023B), the involvement of different countries and areas has been quite different. As one goes from West to East, it was progressively less. There was also exploitation within Central Europe of one group by another, especially in the context of serfdom, which increased in the East of Europe at the same time as Atlantic slavery. Exploitative labor relations functioned around lines that I call racialized. Polish landlords exploited Ukrainian serfs; Hungarian landlords ruled over Slovak and Romanian ones (p. 71). The case of Central Europe demonstrates that racialization is always based on economic exploitation; it demonstrates also that racialization is a process applied iteratively. A group that is racialized as insufficiently White projects the same racialization, in turn, to another group deemed even less White. I suggest that this iterative racialization of Whites by other Whites proceeds in stages, in Europe, from West to East, with England being the whitest and Russia the least so (Chapter 2). (Russians, heirs of a competing empire of their own, however, have their own alternative hierarchy.)

The term “Central Europe” functions within this iterative East-West racialization of European populations. It works as a defensive concept. “Central Europe” is a term most used in the area itself; elsewhere the region is most commonly included, indiscriminately, in “Eastern Europe”. Many Central Europeans consider themselves to be more Western than their eastern and southeastern neighbors. “Central Europe” is not an innocent notion. It can reinforce the discriminatory mechanism of Eastern Europeanism at another scale, suggesting in effect that Eastern

Europeanism is alright, as long as you apply it a little farther East than where Central Europeans are (pp. 97–98, 197–198).

This, certainly, is the wrong reason for separating Central and Eastern Europe. Kazharski and Krivonos worry perhaps that it might also be my reason for doing so. This criticism is very useful to me. I deeply regret the appearance of bias, and feel that I should have been even clearer in the book that I am firmly opposed to it. Nevertheless, I do trust that there are good reasons for not lumping Central and Eastern Europe together; reasons that undermine rather than reinforce the overall edifice of Eastern Europeanism.

My strategy for demonstrating, in the early chapters of *White But Not Quite*, that historical and contemporary facts contradict the habitual association of Central and Eastern Europe, is not to argue for the superiority of the former over the latter. Rather, it is to demolish the flattening of difference that all racism, including Eastern Europeanism, encourages in the racialized object. My intention is to answer the reader who reads my list of typical prejudices about Eastern Europeans, such as that they are more racist or that they are more inclined to organized crime. The reader will be inclined to ask the natural question, “but is it true?” In Chapter 4, I demonstrate that most assumptions about Central Europeans are, at most, half true. My methodology has involved collecting and reinterpreting an array of quantitative data, including from America’s Pew Research Center, Sweden’s University of Gothenburg, and other Western institutions, but also from the Polish, Czech, and Hungarian statistical and election offices. Although Krivonos critiques the methods through which the data was collected as infected with a Western bias, she does not contradict the specific facts those methods produced. The “Western lens” is manifested not so much in the way facts were collected, but in the way they are presented by the organizations that obtained them. For example, Western and Eastern Europe are colored differently on the Pew Research Center’s maps communicating survey results, though the difference is not justified by the facts (pp. 106–109). This ensures arbitrarily that the East and West of Europe will always look different and the Center and East of Europe will always look the same. I deconstruct, not support, such bias.²

There is yet another reason to identify Central Europe as a region distinct from both East and West. Central European identity is not only an

unfortunate, negative construct to assert difference from those farther East or (as Kazharski rightly notes) from Europeans who are Eastern Orthodox. “Central Europe” also has positive content. That is the ambition to make Central Europe central to Europe. I describe the ever-changing content of this aspiration, to create a meaningful Third Way between the West and Russia (even if one that still remains a part of the West), in Chapter 3.

Ultimately, I needed to identify the distinctiveness of Central Europe from Eastern Europe to next confront the global nature of illiberalism. It was only once I was liberated from the racist assumption that everything in “Eastern Europe” is the same and different from the West, that I was able to liberate my topic from the ghettoizing confines of “Central and Eastern European Studies,” and to seek parallels between Central European illiberalism and its closest relatives, which are illiberalism in Western Europe and North America.

CONCLUSION

Reviewers Gábor Scheiring and Kazharski have summed up many parts of the book perhaps more eloquently than I could, so I do not feel a need to elaborate further. I am particularly grateful to Scheiring for recognizing the parallels between his work (E.G. SCHEIRING 2020B; SCHEIRING – SZOMBATI 2020) and mine. My references to illiberalism as being underpinned by the class alliance between segments of “national” capital and “national” labor (pp. 206–209), find substantial confirmation and elaboration in his work, although I was not familiar with it at the time of writing. This has become a major topic for my current research, and I am greatly looking forward to working on it with Scheiring and his colleagues.

I consider my book to be a work of what Herder called *Einfühlung* (PIIRIMÄE – LUKAS 2020; BERLIN 2013: 102). For Herder, “in-feeling” (often translated as “empathy”) was a personalized method of understanding history and society. My book bids the reader to feel their way with me into Central Europe as I have known it. I am deeply grateful to the reviewers for accepting that invitation and for their valuable feedback. And I am most thankful to the convener of this book forum, Daniel Šitera, for putting together the debate and seeing it to print, and to the *Czech Journal of International Relations* for hosting it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In this context, I state in the book as a matter of moral obligation that the violence resulting from racism against Central, and Eastern, Europeans is not comparable in intensity to the much more widespread violence against Blacks and other people of color. Krivonos thinks that by this I mean that racism against Eastern Europeans is, unlike that against people of color, personal rather than structural. I don't.
- 2 This is not the only place where Krivonos appears to misread a position that I criticize, for one that I believe in myself. For example, I emphatically do not restrict the image of Eastern European women to sex workers; what I am saying is that Eastern Europeanists do. The specific experience of female migrants from Eastern Europe that Krivonos cites is not, therefore, in any contradiction with my conclusions, which, unlike Krivonos' work, focus not on migration but on illiberalism *in situ* in Central Europe (though the mutual influence of illiberalism among migrants and illiberalism "at home" is considerable, as I discuss in Kalmar 2023; see also Lewicki 2023; Cawlewicz and Narkowicz 2015).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ivan Kalmar's research has addressed a wide range of topics ranging from Inuit language and the mythology of the computer, to the image of Muslims and Jews in western Christian cultural history. He continues to be keenly interested in how Islamophobic and illiberal notions are generated and spread online. Currently his research focuses on illiberalism in Europe, with a focus on relations between the post-communist members of the European Union and the rest (including between the East and the West in Germany). Prof. Kalmar has co-edited *Orientalism and the Jews* (University Press of New England, 2005) and published *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power* (Routledge, 2012). His latest book is *White But Not Quite: Central Europe's Populist Revolt*

(University of Bristol Press, 2022). Prof. Kalmar's articles appear as book chapters and journal articles in publications dealing with the topics of race and religion, Jews and Muslims, language and nationalism, and others. He has edited a special issue of *Patterns of Prejudice* on Islamophobia in the East of the European Union and, together with Nitzan Shoshan, a special issue of *The Journal of Contemporary European Studies* called Islamophobia in Germany: East/West. Currently he is co-editing a proposed special issue on race and racialization in the East of the European Union, with Aleksandra Lewicki.

Aliaksei Kazharski received his PhD from Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovakia) in 2015. He has been a guest researcher at the University of Oslo (Norway), the University of Tartu (Estonia), the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna (Austria), the University of Vienna (Austria), the Polish Academy of Sciences, Malmö University (Sweden), and Uppsala University (Sweden). His main areas of research have been Central and Eastern Europe, regionalism, and identity in international relations. He is the author of two books: *Eurasian Integration and the Russian World. Regionalism as an Identitary Enterprise* (CEUPress, 2019) and *Central Europe Thirty Years after the Fall of Communism. A Return to the Margin?* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022, winner of the International Studies Association, Global International Relations Section 2022–2023 Book Award).

Daria Krivonos is a sociologist and a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre of Excellence in Law, Identity and the European Narratives, the University of Helsinki. Her research explores post-Soviet migration at the intersection of racialisation, labour, whiteness, class and gender. Her current research project examines young Ukrainian migrant labour and precarity in the context of the Polish service economy. She also leads a project entitled "Life-breaking and Life-making: A research project on social reproduction and survival in times of collapse" funded by Kone Foundation (LIFEMAKE, 2023-2026).

Stephanie Rudwick is a linguistic anthropologist who lectures in African Studies at the University of Hradec Králové and she is also a researcher at the Ethnology Institute of the Czech Academy of Science. Stephanie received awards from the German and the South African research foundations and currently leads a project examining African Diaspora dynamics in the Czech Republic funded by the Czech Research Council. Her primary focus are ethnic, racial and linguistic identity politics and she has published widely on these issues.

Gábor Scheiring is an Assistant Professor at Georgetown University Qatar. He researches the lived experience and political economy of capitalist transformations. His book, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy* (Palgrave, 2020), winner of the BASEES 2021 Book Award, shows how working-class dislocation and business elite co-optation enable illiberalism in Hungary. His studies on economic shocks and welfare examine how rapid economic change increases mental and physical suffering, eroding the legitimacy of the liberal world order. His work has appeared in leading journals such as *The Lancet Global Health*, *Theory and Society*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, and the *Annual Review of Sociology*.