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Editorial 02/2015

Constellation to Constellation: Situation, Encounter & Doubt

BENJAMIN TALLIS
Editor-in-Chief

Low was a reaction to having gone through that peculiar... that dull greenie-grey limelight of America and its repercussions; pulling myself out of it and getting to Europe and saying, For God's sake re-evaluate why you wanted to get into this in the first place? Did you really do it just to clown around in LA? Retire. What you need is to look at yourself a bit more accurately. Find some people you don't understand and a place you don't want to be and just put yourself into it.

David Bowie, to Charles Shaar Murray, NME, 12 November 1977¹

The recent death of David Bowie has given cause for reflection upon the life and work of a remarkably eclectic, influential and inventive artist. Among his most fondly remembered works are the 'Berlin trilogy' of albums released between 1977 and 1979 – *Low*, *"Heroes"* and *Lodger*. Among their many qualities, they mix the hopeful (e.g. 'Be My Wife') with the tragic ('Always Crashing in the Same Car'), and immersed observation ("*Heroes*") with fleeting, distant, speculation ('Warszawa'). The three albums reach far beyond pop culture and leave much of interest for those interested in the politics of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and their connections to wider issues of international relations – now as well as then.

Most obviously, when and where Bowie chose to start 'A New Career in a New Town' – and when he chose to do so – impacted on the work he produced. Re-situating himself in Cold War Berlin proved to be both disciplining and inspirational, and provided the context for different types of encounters – for encounters *with* others and for observing the encounters *of* others – and for finding new ways to interpret and represent these encounters. The second, instrumental side of *Low*, co-written with Brian Eno, was Bowie's "reaction to seeing the East bloc, how West Berlin survives in the midst of it, which was something I couldn't express in words. Rather it required textures."² Encounters with the migrant communities of Berlin are alluded to in tracks such as 'Neuköln' (sic), 'The Secret Life of Arabia', 'Abdulmajid' and 'Yassassin (Turkish for Long Life)'.

Ideas of both the past and the future, of fragile hope and potential doom, also characterise Bowie's Berlin period. He repeatedly refers to the music that, along

with the 'New German Cinema', symbolised the "rebirth of Germany,"³ the sound that arose from the rubble of year zero at the end of the Second World War (e.g. Stubbs, 2014). Many of the instrumental and textural soundscapes that he created with Eno draw on the new German electronic and 'motorik' music and several other tracks – "Heroes," 'Neuköln' and 'V2-Schneider' – pay explicit or implicit homage to Kraftwerk and Neu!. As well as dealing with this painful past, the trilogy is haunted by what Bowie called "a sense of yearning for a future that we all knew would never come to pass"⁴ (talking about "Heroes") and by the potential curtailment of all futures in a nuclear conflict triggered by rising East-West tensions – as Chris O' Leary interprets *Lodger's* 'Fantastic Voyage'.⁵

However, it is the song "Heroes" that perhaps comes closest to Bowie's aim of "looking at yourself more accurately" through encounters in uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations. Multiple interpretations of the song abound – it has been widely covered, and its epic melody and refrain of fleeting glory have often seen it used in montages for sports events or at awards ceremonies. However, "Heroes" is a brittle epic, and the façade of grand narratives splinters to reveal quotidian realities and small dreams. The song operates on multiple scales – the intractability of a claustrophobic, failing relationship, doomed lovers in the shadow of the wall, the superpowers' dance of death, glimpsing the other and wondering what if. Small dreams and reflecting on what we can do, how we can live, apart and together, were, as Bowie himself put it, the point:

that's exactly where you should arrive...You arrive at a sense of compassion. The title track of "Heroes" is about facing that kind of reality and standing up to it. The only heroic act one can fucking well pull out of the bag in a situation like that is to get on with life from the very simple pleasure of remaining alive, despite every attempt being made to kill you.⁶

A decade after Bowie left Berlin the wall came down. Finally, "we could be us."

Today, however, the migration crisis has seen encounters with the other in Germany again make headlines and top political agendas across Europe. The logic of walls has returned to the continent and with it have come the potential seeds of a new East-West divide. Many European leaders see the Schengen zone as under threat, and talk of the need for a "core Europe" that may exclude many of the CEE countries has re-emerged (Habermas and Derrida, 2005 [2003]; De Waele, 2016).⁷

CENTRAL EUROPE – HEADING BACK EAST?

Eastern Europe is back. In recent months, countless commentaries (including my own) have pinned much of the blame for the failure, so far, to find a European solution to the European migration crisis at the door of several *Central and East European*

countries. Many of these commentaries (although not my own) have referred to these countries as *Eastern Europe*. This East has resurfaced in a variety of configurations that, depending on the point being made, may include the Visegrad Four (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia –, the ‘Western Balkan’ EU member states (Croatia and Slovenia), the Eastern Balkan EU member states (Bulgaria and Romania) and the states on the migrants’ ‘Balkan route’ (Macedonia and Serbia). Regardless of the referent, as in the past, the application of the adjective ‘Eastern’ is usually pejorative (e.g. Wolff, 1994; Bakic-Hayden, 1995; Case, 2009). It is never applied to other EU states, regardless of their geography, even if they too have obstructed a solution and even if Prague stubbornly remains West of Vienna.

Central Europe is back too. For some, the migration crisis has generated a new-found unity among the V4, which is styled as an institutional instantiation of *Central Europe*. This has been welcomed even to the extent of questioning the V4 states’ own hard-won places in the European Union (e.g. Hokovsky, 2016). The overtly anti-EU aspects of the recently-returned Kaczynski-inspired government in Poland and the longer-standing Orban and Fico administrations in Hungary and Slovakia respectively only seem to reinforce this perception. Central Europe in this case is used to claim a ‘sensible’ stance on migration and sovereignty in opposition to supposed German recklessness and EU diktat. In the past, famously, the term Central Europe has been used to distinguish from a further – and supposedly wilder and more backward – East; now it is used to differentiate from a further – and supposedly morally profligate and multicultural – West (e.g. Kundera, 1984). Meanwhile much of this West seems again happy to reapply the old Eastern label to the Centre (Esterhazy, 2005: 74–75).

As ever, the situation is more complex than what such commonly used generalisations allow: committed pro-migrant activists and anti-government opposition groups abound across the region; the divergence between the Czech premier and the President and the partial split between the Czech Republic and the other V4 states widen; the nuances in conduct among the Balkan states occur amidst their vast differences in current opportunities and outlook; ongoing partnership and dialogue exist alongside the discord between Germany and the V4 states; Angela Merkel self-identifies as an Eastern European when castigating the conduct of Eastern European states in responding to the migration crisis.⁸ Despite processes of post-communist transition that saw CEE countries attempt to shed their Eastern-ness (and have their European-ness recognised through EU membership) we can question whether it ever disappeared in the minds of, e.g., British or French citizens faced with an influx of migrants⁹ from the region (e.g. Kuus, 2004; Burrell, 2010).

The current issue of *New Perspectives* comes against this troubling context but carries with it the potential to provoke constellations of scholarship, ideas and encounters that can enhance our understanding of the conditions and potential consequences of this unfolding situation as well as illuminating the issues that are specifically addressed

by each of the articles. The themes of situatedness, encounter and doubt are as central to these processes as they are to David Bowie's Berlin trilogy.

PROVOKING CONSTELLATIONS: EXPLORING COMPLEXITY, REFLECTING ON SITUATEDNESS

In the editorial to the previous (and first) issue of *New Perspectives* I outlined our journal's mission – “**to provoke new constellations** of scholarship across approaches and disciplines, which can challenge received wisdoms on the social, spatial and temporal life of [Central and Eastern Europe].” As I also noted, challenging orthodoxies through “widen[ing] and deepen[ing] interpretive and explanatory frameworks for creating *useful knowledge on and in the region*” is central to our mission as a journal. The events of recent months only confirm the salience of this mission – as do the longer-term trends they reflect and indeed may generate. New constellations of knowledge are required to do justice to the complexity described above and to its roots in and impacts on the societies, politics and cultures of the region and their relations to (and/or place in) those of other regions.

This, second, issue of *New Perspectives* contains a variety of articles that go about this deepening and widening of our frameworks for understanding the complex and contested politics and international relations of CEE. **Tomáš Dopita's** ‘(Inter)National Reconstruction’ challenges the basis – and conclusions – of two of the classics of poststructuralist IR – David Campbell's *National Deconstruction* and Lene Hansen's *Security as Practice*. Like Campbell, Dopita sees his work as being explicitly policy relevant. Campbell's work challenged international policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, which he saw as based on essentialist and ethno-determinist views of the conflict there. Dopita now challenges what he sees as the “hyper-liberal bias” – in the work of Campbell and Hansen as well as in international policy – that has led to ineffective “difference-blind” policies that fail to recognise the situatedness of subject positions and which, in the scholarly case, are linked to misidentification of the various subjects involved in the conflict. Dopita also responds to Hansen's invitation to enter into debate over “poststructuralist methodological choices and their consequences” (2006: 211).

Mai Vilson looks at what the actions (and communications) of the Baltic states during the Ukraine crisis can tell us about the Europeanisation of their foreign policy. As foreign policy is supposedly one of the last bastions of sovereignty, this article not only presents brand new empirical material but also pushes the boundaries of Europeanisation research. Vilson makes the case for understanding a greater variety of nuances in vectors of Europeanisation, but also in the (temporal) connections between substantive and procedural aspects of these processes. Significantly, however, Vilson, like Dopita, highlights the importance of situatedness and the specificity of the Baltic states as a group and individually in their relations to both the European Union and Russia, which gained particular salience during the Ukraine crisis.

Daniel Šitera's sparkling review essay engages two recent, standard-setting International Political Economy (IPE) collections along spatial, temporal and normative axes. He sees these collections as (somewhat successfully) attempting a theoretical renewal of the Comparative Capitalisms (CC) and Varieties of Capitalism approaches, partly through the kind of interdisciplinary approach advocated by *New Perspectives* and through revived encounters between CC and critical IPE. Šitera too focuses on situatedness – of knowledge production and theoretical relevance – in assessing how well the insights in the collections 'travel' and thus of what relevance they are to understanding political-economic issues in CEE. While emphasising the possibilities the collections open up – particularly Ebenau¹⁰ et al. (2015) – Šitera notes that certain hierarchies are imposed on CEE from outside, including a false dependency that overlooks the abundance of resistance and contestation – as well as the willing reproduction of certain power relations – within and through the region. What Šitera calls a pessimism of the intellect we may also understand, after Walter Benjamin, as a 'leftist melancholia' (*Linke Melancholie*), where normative purpose clouds analysis and becomes potentially self-defeating (see, e.g., Brown, 1999, or Scribner, 2003: 13).

The contrast between the approaches discussed above and that of this issue's ***Intervention*** piece – the **IMEMO Annual 'Russia and the World' Forecast 2016** – is marked. The forecast presents political economic insights but mainly focuses on foreign policy analysis and identification of key short-term circumstances of and long-term trends in Russia's relations with the world. IMEMO's analysis highlights the potential (but also the worrying uncertainty) of the "enforced cooperation," which they see between Russia and the West to confront emerging threats and overcome the difficulties stemming from Russia's actions in Ukraine. The forecast discusses the chaotic state of contemporary geopolitics, characterised by the "express-re-alpolitik" of the major players and the unpredictable actions of other players, but also the emerging outline of a future "grand chessboard," particularly in relation to nascent mega-regional trade deals. Those who question the normative as well as the analytical value of viewing geopolitics as a 'great game' will question this, but IMEMO's perspective again reveals much about Russian desires to be a great power and be recognised as such – a position criticised by Iver Neumann (2015) in our forum on the 2015 forecast.¹¹ This ongoing possibility for dialogue is the hope that lies behind our publication of this English language version of the forecast (for the second year running), which offers insights into the thinking of a highly respected part of the Russian academic establishment. The forecast's candour on Russia's problems will surprise some while its assessments of the problems and motives of others – including the EU and the US – will infuriate others. **We invite you to join the debate in the forum of responses to the forecast that will be published in a forthcoming issue of *New Perspectives*.**¹²

The **Forum** that completes this issue consists of responses to Ulrich Kühn's *Intervention* piece (published in the last issue) that advocated a Harmel 2.0 plan for **NATO to "Deter and Engage" Russia**. Irina Kobrinskaya (of IMEMO), Ondřej Ditrych and Łukasz Kulesa encounter Kühn's arguments from different positions, and his rebuttal recognises this plural relationality. These encounters triggered varied discussion on, *inter alia*, the role of CEE states in shaping NATO's attitude to Russia; the desirability of containing (or taming) Russia; and the issue of NATO enlargement and how far the alliance should be willing to compromise some of its principles in order to work towards a sustainable and inclusive security order in Europe – something all of the contributors advocate but on different terms. The division of labour between NATO and the EU and the possibilities that should be offered to states such as Georgia and Ukraine also figure strongly in the discussion – they are active agents in some analyses, but mere pawns in greater games in others. Significantly, Kühn notes not only the hypocrisy of the West (potentially weakening Ditrych and Kulesa's arguments) but also Russia's soft-power deficit (which undermines Kobrinskaya's – and Russia's – position).

FROM CONSTELLATION TO ENCOUNTER AND BACK

Each of the articles discussed above explicitly engages certain issues, but their appearance in constellation also prompts implicit engagements between them. Post-structuralist enquiries in the Balkans are drawn into relation with Europeanisation approaches, which contrast with IMEMO's analysis of the Baltic States; (critical) International Political Economy (IPE) is juxtaposed with a variety of 'Russian' and 'Western' foreign policy and security studies analyses, which, in turn, are questioned by the critical constructivism of some of the earlier articles. This constellation has the potential to generate reflections – what is missing, what could be supplemented, what could be removed, what could be refined; what do we approve, what do we reject; where do we meet; what do we want? *What do we provoke when we provoke constellations?*

In his penetrating analysis of the shortcomings of both the international intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina and poststructuralist critiques of the intervention, Tomáš Dopita notes the importance of *constellations* of subjects and subjectivities in analysing social outcomes but, crucially, he also focuses on the central significance of the **encounters** between subjects in shaping their subjectivities and the constellations of their relations. This situates Dopita's analysis in a long and varied tradition of interdisciplinary scholarship looking at inter-subjective construction of identity and meaning and the encounters between self and other that help confirm various degrees of separation between these two positions – individually, collectively and along the spectrum between.¹³

However, reading Dopita's analysis of encounters and constellations alongside the mission of *New Perspectives* prompts us to consider the qualities and conditions

of the encounters that we provoke when we provoke constellations. This consideration should be fivefold:

- I. Who are the (academic) subjects that we draw into encounter, and what are the qualities and conditions of the encounters we provoke between them as well as between the types of knowledge they produce?
- II. How do these conditions and qualities affect the type of knowledge that is – or can be – produced in and on CEE? Who produces this knowledge, and how is this knowledge situated?
- III. What are the relations between this knowledge and the conditions and qualities of intra- and inter-regional socio-political encounters beyond academia?
- IV. How do these encounters and types of knowledge affect identifications with and perceptions of CEE and identification with or differentiation from other regions? How do they relate to situatedness and subjectivity?
- V. How do these encounters and types of knowledge contribute to continuity or change in constellations – of subjects and knowledge in and on CEE?

This framework suggests a repeated interplay between encounters and constellations, with constellations (partly) conditioning encounters – and the ways we understand them – but also being susceptible to change, including through encounters, over time. As noted previously, a key aspect of understanding the encounters that take place (and the constellations they relate to) is situatedness – both of the subjects involved and of the researchers attempting to understand them. There are thus four (connected) types of constellation – and encounter – that *New Perspectives* seeks to provoke: I) constellations and encounters of knowledge; II) constellations of and encounters of scholars; III) constellations and encounters of scholars and non-scholars; IV) constellations of and encounters in policy and practice.

We may therefore ask how the articles in this issue – and the previous issue – of *New Perspectives* relate to each other – what do they highlight in the other, what more could we ask of them by seeing them in connection – in constellation? How do they complement or add to each other? Where do they contradict and challenge? What questions do they prompt? What answers do they provide, what past encounters do they testify to and which future ones do they suggest? Where and how are they resonant or dissonant, and how does this affect how we go about our work, about our lives?

JUST FOR ONE DAY?

It is fascinating and productive to read Kobrinskaya and IMEMO's analyses together with Vilson's, as this allows us to see from different angles, to take multiple perspectives into account at once. Adding Dopita's analysis of the construction of col-

lective subjects through encounter could shed significant light on their positions and on the NATO-Russia (and EU-Russia) relations, which were discussed in the Forum, further broadening and deepening the perspectives given by the multiple subject positions already in play there. There is much agreement to be found in the analyses of IMEMO and of the scholars that Šitera discusses – particularly with regard to the new mega-regional trade deals – but much else that would leave them at loggerheads.

And that is precisely the point. In provoking constellations, *New Perspectives* offers the chance to follow David Bowie's example and "find some people you don't understand and a place you don't want to be and just put yourself into it." There is still much to be done to provoke the types of constellations that lead to sustained encounters between the types of scholars and approaches presented in this issue and to widen and multiply these constellations, to cast our net further and draw in scholars who may not otherwise meet or who may not otherwise work on CEE. **The Panels that we will have at the ISA¹⁴ annual convention in Atlanta in March** are a good start in this regard, but we want more – and so we continue to welcome submissions and proposals from scholars across the spectrum of social research.¹⁵

Understanding and dealing with challenges of the magnitude of those outlined above in relation to the potential return of walls, fences and the logic of division to Europe – and of Cold War logics to NATO-Russia relations – requires creative thinking from multiple perspectives and scales, encompassing different levels and foci of analysis. By changing our situations, inserting ourselves into new constellations and experiencing different encounters we can be more reflexive and, like Bowie, retain the 'Sense of Doubt', yet also the senses of hope, possibility and purpose that drive creative as well as critical thinking.

ENDNOTES

¹ Original Interview in the *NME* (New Musical Express) (1977), reproduced at <http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/articles/771112-nme.html>.

² Original Interview in the *NME*, reproduced at <http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/articles/771112-nme.html>.

³ As discussed and beautifully represented in the BBC4 documentary 'Krautrock: The Rebirth of Germany' (2009) directed by Benjamin Whalley.

⁴ Original Interview in *Uncut* (1999) – reproduced at <https://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/2011/05/11/heroes/>.

⁵ I am indebted to O'Leary's wonderful blog – *Pushing Ahead of the Dame* – which is, in itself, a fantastic voyage through David Bowie's oeuvre and a treasure trove of detail: <https://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/category/lodger-1979/>.

⁶ Original interview in *Melody Maker* (1977), reproduced at <https://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/2011/05/11/heroes/>.

⁷ See also <http://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/eu-s-founding-members-look-for-more-europe-even-if-it-is-smaller/>.

⁸ See, e.g., <http://www.politico.eu/article/merkel-eu-needs-to-consider-treaty-change/>.

⁹ See, e.g., <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3232763/After-years-Eastern-European-migrants-starting-new-lives-UK-s-turn-countries-complain-new-arrivals.html>; <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/apr/28/gordon-brown-gillian-duffy-transcript>; <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9d5d703a-cf14-11d9-8cb5-00000e2511c8.html#axzz30fr0yJac>.

¹⁰ Matthias Ebenau is a member of the Editorial Board of *New Perspectives*.

¹¹ See *New Perspectives*: 23(1)

¹² Contact Editor-in-Chief Benjamin Tallis – tallis@iir.cz – or Assistant Editor Marketa Wittichova – wittichova@iir.cz – if you are interested in authoring a response to the IMEMO 2016 Forecast.

¹³ See, as a selection of examples with different approaches and perspectives, Adler (2013), Butler (1993), Ley (2002 [1978]) and Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012).

¹⁴ Panels WD74 and FC76 on ‘Making Central and Eastern Europe International: New Perspectives’.

¹⁵ All submissions to newperspectives@iir.cz, all inquiries to tallis@iir.cz or wittichova@iir.cz.

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