

CENTRAL EUROPEAN STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT A New Interdisciplinary Seminar in Oxford

von Robert Pyrah/Marius Turda (Oxford)

Information on the seminar,
updated regularly, can be found at:
<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sant1786>

The continued topicality of ›Central Europe‹ as a concept in history, political science and other disciplines was underlined by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union on 1 January 2007. As ›Western‹ European borders have shifted, so has the concept of ›Easternness‹, which, since the end of the Cold War, has retreated from public discussion owing to its specific historical baggage. Because of the perceived need to distance the region from ›Iron Curtain‹ era discourse of ›East‹ and ›West‹, as well as the drive to reinvestigate old historical ties and forge new economic ones, the term ›Central Europe‹ has therefore acquired new impetus over the last decade and a half.

But the conceptual framework of Central European Studies also reflects wider academic developments, in particular the trend towards theme-based, interdisciplinary approaches that cut across time periods, national-historical narratives and geographies.

The new Oxford seminar on Central Europe, run by Dr Marius Turda (Oxford Brookes) and Dr Robert Pyrah (Wolfson College, Oxford), with substantial support from Dr Jan Fellerer (Wolfson College), embraces breadth and interdisciplinarity as guiding principles, and there is certainly no shortage of new research on Central Europe on which to draw.

The sessions of the seminar thus reflect the diversity of the term and its scope, covering such topics as political developments in the EU, and cabaret in Germany, Austria and Poland during the interwar period. Both of these will be covered in future sessions of the seminar, which invites participants to present research findings on thematic lines that may not otherwise be linked by geography or period. One example is a planned session on sovereignty for later in 2007 that will cover medieval Poland and modern Europe. Past sessions include the topics »Medical History: Race and Eugenics« (11 May 2006), led by Dr Marius Turda and Professor Paul Weindling (Oxford Brookes); »Urbanism and Fascism« (11 November 2006), with presentations from Dr Robert Mallett (Birmingham) and Dr Aristotle Kallis (Lancaster); and »Fascism and Modernism« (20 May 2006), at which Professor Roger Griffin (Oxford Brookes) was interviewed by Dr Matthew Feldman (Northampton).

Furthermore, the seminar intersperses presentations by younger and aspiring scholars with those by established academics. In keeping with the aim to foster new approaches, speakers are asked to present their findings in pairs, in an innovative, dialogue-based format. This is designed to encourage a maximum of interaction from all participants, who bring to the themed debate reflections from their own particular focus of study or geographical region within Central Europe. A good example of this approach in practice was given by the session on »Propaganda and Ideology« in November 2005, led by Katya Kocourek and Dr Rory Yeomans (both of SSEES/UCL, London). Although the presentations overlapped in the time period covered, Dr Yeomans focused on the Ustacha regime in Croatia while Ms Kocourek looked at the Slovak regimes. Participants were able to draw on their own research, looking for instance at uses of propaganda in Austrian cultural policies (Dr Pyrah) by way of comparison with the regimes discussed. An earlier session (21 October 2006) on »Psychiatry in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy« led by Dr Leslie Topp (Birkbeck, London) and Dr Emese Lafferton (Edinburgh) encouraged similarly diverse responses. Dr Topp's focus on Vienna was neatly complemented by Dr Lafferton's examination of institutions and their symbolic role in Hungary, which both reflected and contradicted impulses from the Imperial capital.

Nevertheless, the differing needs of our speakers mean that the seminar's format remains flexible. To date we have witnessed one special guest lecture (23 November 2006), given by Professor Peter Pulzer (All Souls, Oxford). Prof. Pulzer spoke about »Austrian Historians and the Third Reich«, and dissected the different approaches in Austria from those in Germany, where a more comprehensive de-Nazification was implemented. He emphasized the late arrival of a reckoning with Austria's past and identified the complicity of the Allies in the process, allowing Austria to present itself as Hitler's »First Victim« rather than a willing participant in Nazi crimes. Another speaker-led presentation will take place this term, led by Professor Philip Longworth, (formerly of McGill University, Montreal) on »Central Europe Facing Russia«, a topic of immense topicality that promises to rouse some lively debate.

With »enlightenment« in the broad sense as our natural aim, the inaugural session of the seminar (4 May 2006) provided a fitting introduction. Senior academics Professor Robert

Evans (Oriel College, Oxford) and Professor Ritchie Robertson (St. John's College, Oxford) spoke from their respective disciplinary perspectives – history and modern languages – on »The Austrian Enlightenment«. In this case, the dialogue-based format was maintained, with short presentations by both speakers followed by more lengthy discussion with participants.

Although dialogue has been our guiding principle, we plan eventually to publish a selection of thematically linked papers based on research findings presented at the Seminar. Also, given the importance of international networks in our research field, the seminar aims to foster links with institutes and groups abroad, with the eventual goal being conference activity and other forms of scholarly exchange in a trans-national context.

In the meantime, we look forward to organising many productive further sessions, reflecting the scope of Central Europe not only as a subject of academic study, but as an evolving concept in history, politics and culture.

