Modernity in eastern Europe tends to be seen either as the partial opening up of a region characterized by traditional forms of societal self-understanding, or as a disfigured and radicalized adaptation of western modernity that prioritizes closure. Paul Blokker, in an article focusing on Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland and Hungary, argues that both views need to be combined.

The advance of (western) modernity in the eastern part of Europe in the last two centuries has often been understood as providing inroads of openness into a largely non-modern, peripheral region, predominantly characterized by tradition and non-reflexive, closed forms of societal self-understanding. In a related way, a widespread argument (a narrative that re-emerged after 1989) is that modern nationalism in central and eastern Europe – in contrast to that which developed in western Europe – took a particularly problematic, exclusivist, traditionalist, and ethno-cultural turn (cf. Dobrescu 2003). The argument in this essay is that such a counter-positioning of modernism and openness to traditionalism and closure is problematic, and that the experiences with modernity in the region need to be re-interpreted as not only imposed from outside, but equally as adapted to local circumstances as well as having emerged from within, displaying a variety of political projects and modernizing experiences involving both societal openness and closure. The argument here is made from within a wider approach to modernity that can be identified as “multiple modernities”, and the main argument is that even if one cannot speak of a specific variant of modernity emerging in the region, it is warranted to speak of distinct patterns of modernization. A social, political, and cultural history of the region’s variegated experiences undoubtedly needs to do justice to a plurality of modernizing trajectories, which, however, also portray some important similarities. In this regard, both forms of closure and openness are part of the region’s experience with modernity, and have been at the basis of a plurality of (competing as well as successive) projects of modernization.

As Johann Arnason has argued, in the analysis of multiple modernities and patterns of modernization, a distinction can be made between those societies that experienced modernity by means of an “internal logic” and those that were “more affected by geopolitical and historical contingencies” (Arnason 2005: 436). The modern trajectories
of the societies in the central and eastern parts of Europe were mostly part of the latter rather than the former experience. This observation should not, however, lead to the dismissal of the idea any genuinely local experience with modernity.

Arnason further suggests that the analysis of multiple modernities not only involves a comparative dimension in synchronic, but also in diachronic terms. In other words, modernity involves successive configurations and mutations. In contrast to western modernity, where one could speak of an immanent transformation from a liberal to an organized form of modernity (Wagner 1994), in central and eastern Europe, it is more accurate to speak of interrupted patterns, (aborted) modernizing advances and imposed modernities. But the distinction between liberal and organized modernity can in these cases still be useful as a heuristic device to explore such successive or “alternating modernities”. Liberal modernity is habitually more readily related to openness and freedom, while organized modernity – in various, divergent guises – is at least in some ways more easily identified as about closure, control, and isolation. But the latter cannot be reduced to full societal closure in the form of totalitarian or totalistic experiences (as in the “alternative modernities” of fascism and communism). Rather, distinct forms of organized modernity can be equally understood as following a logic of emancipation or liberation, as in projects of modernization that are guided by social-democratic views, but notions of emancipation (even if radically re-interpreted) are clearly not unimportant to the communist and fascist projects either.

The central and eastern European modern trajectories are then primarily characterized by external dependency or an exposure to exogenous stimuli (cf. Arnason 2005: 435). In the process, however, distinct societies developed different forms of “singularization” of modernity (Blokker & Delanty forthcoming), both through specific forms of exit from imperial structures as well as patterns of nation-state formation (building on indigenous traditions), and by means of identification to larger, civilizational spaces (in distinct periods, the mythical figure of Central Europe loomed particularly large). In this, both nationalism and wider, civilizational identifications could include emphases on openness, universalism, and pluralism, but also on closure, exclusion and indigenity. It appears, in this, that there is no direct relation between particularism and closure, or universalism and openness. And traditions of singularization were not necessarily aborted with the advent of communism, but were variously subject to censorship and repression, as well as reproduction and adaptation in, for instance, forms of national communism. And traditions of nationalism clearly also informed discourses of resistance against communist regimes, as in the Polish case, while distinct legacies of traditions of openness and closure without doubt also played a role after 1989 (cf. Kubik 2003).

One way of understanding extremer forms of closure is by relating it to the idea of “alternative modernities”, in some of the more conspicuous cases strongly informed by logics of Jacobinism and ideas of totalizing societal change (cf. Eisenstadt 1999). In reaction to what was often perceived as the extreme relativism, materialism, and inauthenticity of the western project of modernity, a pure, indigenous view and way of life, or, alternatively, a superior, higher form of modernity was proposed. Such counterviews themselves equally leaned on modern imaginary, not least in the form of the Romanticist critique of individualism and rationalism, but also in emphases on revolutionary change and the future implementation and realization of an ideal society (constructed on the basis of visions of the past). Closure can take here the form of a
retreat of society into oneself as well as the totalizing control of politics, knowledge, and society, but can also be projected onto the wider world in the form of an alternative modernizing – in some cases, imperialist – project. The most significant and enduring attempt was clearly communism.

In an analytical sense, societal forms of closure can be distinguished along different lines. One way is to differentiate between ideological, cultural, political and economic forms of closure. Ideological closure has to do with an absolutist, essentialist view that tolerates only one type of discourse as the true expression of the needs of society. This type of totalizing, ideological closure was clearly part of the communist experience in Soviet societies, where any form of relativism regarding the tenets of Leninism-Marxism was widely denied. A second form of closure, in cultural terms, has to do with forms of societal self-understanding and national identity. Also in terms of cultural closure, there tends to be intolerance towards external influences, in particular those related to the West and western modernity (democracy, capitalism), and a predilection of what is portrayed as indigenous culture. Culture is in itself understood as homogeneous and as equally shared by all members of society. A third type, political closure, has to do with political interaction and understandings of political agency. In radical forms of political closure, only one type of political agent is tolerated, or better, actively endorsed, where any opposition or dissent is displayed as a threat to the system (the “enemy of the people”). Political power is seen as in need of centralization and as shared by the enlightened few (the vanguard or supreme leader). Political closure is thus about the negation of pluralism and political conflict. Economic types of closure relate to forms of autarky or national autonomy (as in the “neo-liberal” party’s view in Romania of the 1920s: “prin noi insine”/”for ourselves”). The emphasis in economic closure is on self-sufficiency and national control.

It can be argued, contrary to historical determinist views, that central and eastern European traditions of closure in the last two centuries have less to do with the incomplete adaptation to modernity or the incapacity to adopt western modern ideas and structures (cf. Sztompka 1993, for the idea of “civilizational incompetence”), but rather with the development of countertexts, distinct elaborations, and reactive forms of different interpretations of modernity. This does, of course, not mean that particular historical images, symbols and traditions have not been reproduced, but rather that such imagery has been utilized in and adapted to modern counternarratives and self-understandings.

In an analogous way, one can develop a distinction of forms of openness. Ideological openness relates to more relativistic, non-foundational and reflexive views of understandings of the common good (this is often related to political liberalism, but cannot be reduced to it), an emphasis on publicness, and in some cases an acceptance of a continuous intra-societal dialogue. In cultural terms, openness will concern some kind of acceptance of the pluralistic background of any cultural identity, forms of multiculturality, and its basis in a variety of traditions. In political terms, openness means an understanding of political power or sovereignty in a differentiated and shared way, rather than grounded in a centralistic view. In economic terms, openness relates to the economy as an open process of trade and international economic relations, and as an imaginary is informed by notions of “competition” rather than “self-sufficiency”.

Page 3/13
Below I will briefly engage in a concise, and necessarily incomplete, overview of four major and successive confrontations with modernity in central and eastern Europe since the early nineteenth century. The attempt is to depict the variegated as well as interrupted nature of the region’s experiences with modernity, and to indicate a dual legacy of both openness and closure, in contrast to the assumption of a singular experience with closure, control, and authoritarian, centralized forms of modern society.

First confrontation with modernity: Liberation and nation-building

The more or less exact historical periods of encounter between central and eastern European societies with western (liberal) modernity differ from case to case, but in general it can be argued that such encounters informed profound changes in a political, economic and cultural sense. In many instances, such as in the Romanian case, such changes were nevertheless gradual, as a result of the geopolitical situation but also due to the fact that it were initially small groups of “enlightened” elites that took notice of modern ideas and discourses related to liberalism and early nationalism (in particular notions of “self-determination” and “national independence”) and employed these ideas in interaction with indigenous ones on (national) identity and self-understanding.

It has often been argued that the “transfer of ideas” from West to East resulted in the contextual re-interpretation of such ideas, ultimately turning into a support of collectivist emancipatory projects against foreign domination (two cases in point might be the liberal-inspired Romanian pasoptist movement and the Hungarian nationalist movement led by Lajos Kossuth), in contrast to western European movements of bourgeois liberation against the absolutist state. The argument is then that some of the original aspects of individual emancipation and civil society creation as they emerged in the West were lost or at least importantly modified in the East (cf. Ludwikowski 1981; Szacki 1995). The upshot of this reading is that modernity in the East was re-interpreted through a nationalist, collectivist lens.

If one accepts this argument, it could then – in an admittedly somewhat sweeping way – be concluded that in the first confrontation with eighteenth and nineteenth century modernity (with what Peter Wagner has identified as “liberal modernity”) important factors related to political, ideational, and cultural openness were “lost in translation” or compromised. Or, in a partially different reading, it could be argued that the region’s intellectuals were more attracted by Romanticist nationalism than by individualist and legalist liberal views. The aim of the 1848 revolutions in the region was then less about the liberation of the bourgeoisie from the subjection to absolutism as it was about the national emancipation from foreign dependence (i.e. from the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, or Russian empires), as well as about the creation of homogeneous nation-states in the first place. This is then often the basis for the argument that exclusivist nationalism and closure, rather than political nationalism and openness, were the hallmarks of the central and eastern European encounter with modernity.

In this line of argument, there is, however, the risk that central and eastern European modernization and nationalism are understood in a homogeneous and one-sided way (Dobrescu 2003), and that regionally and locally distinct contributions to European modernity and nationalism are ignored (Walicki 1982). One might, however, want to
rephrase and nuance the whole argument in terms of the idea that the region’s first confrontation with liberal modernity consisted of tendencies of both opening and closure. In other words, while the encounter itself stimulated the adoption of ideas clearly related to the opening up of traditional societies, and the diffusion of perceptions of progress, rationality, tolerance, and democracy, at the same time the encounter provided access to ideas – much more related to eighteenth century Romanticism rather than liberalism – as well as strengthened local self-understandings and historical consciousness that provided the basis for understanding this process of opening up in terms of a re-closure of society around the idea of national community. This could perhaps also be described as a kind of “particularizing the universal”.

In many, but not all, instances, this movement for – political and cultural – closure ultimately took the form of a prioritization of the understanding of identity as national identity or the identity of the national majority, the homogenization of national space as inhabited by a singular people, characterized by a singular, authentic local culture and history (“national specificity”), and represented by a singular state. But this simplified picture is evidently only a part of a much more complex whole, in which various narratives of collective identity were struggling for visibility and predominance. In this regard, it seems more accurate to not so much counterpose the region’s experiences to a homogenized, western European liberal modernity, but rather to emphasize the multiplicity and contingency of experiences with modernity, very much along the lines of a reading of modernity as undermining any transcendental or external fixing point for societies (in terms of a religious world-view or society as a natural hierarchy). On this view, the distinct nature of the region’s modern experience is not so much to be found in a singular illiberal, closed, and ethno-nationalist interpretation of modernity, but rather in the variegated, unstable, and alternating nature of the experiences (cf. Harsanyi and Kennedy 1995).

This variegation and instability, rather than one-sided deviation in terms of closure, is evident both when comparing different cases and when tracing distinct trajectories. In the Czech case one could, for instance, identify “five identities in the making” during nineteenth and twentieth century processes of nation building, some of which clearly included markers beyond the nation-state (as in pan-Austrian, pan-German and Slavic models, see Arnason 2005: 437-8). In the Polish case, it was evidently not merely the influence of western European developments that stimulated the construction of national identity, but a significant, pioneering role of Polish intellectuals in developing a Romantic nationalist programme (Walicki 1982). What is more, and as Andrzej Walicki has convincingly shown, Polish nationalism in the early nineteenth century could not be reduced to a closed, ethno-nationalist view of a majority nation, but included wider Slavophile sentiments, ideas of a multi-ethnic nation, as well as universalistic, open perceptions of the nation (Walicki 1982: 2-5). In the Hungarian case, a nationalism dominated by the Hungarian nobility, which was very much self-conscious of the role Hungary had played in the Habsburg empire, was of an inclusive even if assimilationist kind, at least until the First World War (Barkey 2000). Another example of the region’s more complex relation to modernity and nationalism is the Romanian case, where an emerging Europeanist discourse, linked both to an indigenous discourse of Latinity (which in particular emerged in eighteenth century Transylvania, then still part of the Habsburg empire) and a nationalist liberal movement, was increasingly contended during the nineteenth century by a more indigenist understanding of Romanian identity, which
prioritized indigenous traditions of specificity and “Romanianness”, and a more eastern, Orthodox as well as Slavic leaning (cf. Blokker 2003; 2004).

The acknowledgement of the significance of contending understandings of (national) identity is not only important to counter oversimplified understandings of central and eastern European nationalisms as merely reactionary forms of closure against western modernity (in contradistinction to western European, civic nationalisms). It is also important to recognize that while rival views (often entailing totalistic views of closure) became more important when liberal, western-oriented projects became increasingly untenable in the 1920 and 30s, it did not necessarily mean the definite eclipse of more open views of the national community.

**Second confrontation: Alternative projects of organized modernity**

While the first encounter with modernity importantly intermeshed with waves of state formation and nation-building in the region, a second confrontation, most prominent in the 1920s and 30s, reverberated with an inward turn that in multiple ways pointed to a form of closure of modernity (but even if this was a general tendency, it should be borne in mind that forms of closure were much more prominent and radical in some societies than in others). The second confrontation importantly contributed to the reinforcement of a longer historical trend of instability and peripherality vis-à-vis western Europe. In this regard, the fairly abrupt abortion of liberal-democratic projects of modernization by means of the challenge of radical, alternative projects in many countries in the region could be adequately described as a region-wide experience of “unsettled modernity” (Arnason 2003: 450). At the same time, important continuities can be observed, e.g. in terms of a relative predilection for the state as main actor of modernization (compromising or stifling forms of pluralism), and the significant role of intellectuals in the region (cf. Arnason 2003; Schöpflin 1990; Szakolczai 2005).

The unsettled and interrupted nature of modernity in the region is particularly clear in countries such as post-1918 “Greater” Romania, where an uplift in national grandeur (as a result of territorial expansion, fulfilling historical dreams of unification) was rapidly challenged by radical nationalist and fascist counter-projects that further exploited and radicalized the national dream. Or, in a mirror image, the case of Hungary, where the dismemberment of the country in the wake of the Treaty of Trianon induced radical reactions in terms of a general move toward ethnic understandings of nationalism and the emergence of indigenous fascism. Any hopes of the fascists (the most conspicuous cases are indeed the Arrow Cross movement in Hungary and the Iron Guard in Romania) to effectively implement their views fairly quickly evaporated in the context of the vagaries of the Second World War and the subsequent incorporation of the region into the Soviet imperial project.

The tendency towards a closure of modernity in the interwar years took many forms, even if it did not necessarily supplant all discourses related to openness, civic inclusion and pluralism. In a cultural sense, political communities were increasingly viewed as in need of a homogeneous cultural identity, and possibilities of communication and social interaction increasingly understood as only possible within the confines of a historically developed, “pure” national community (thereby excluding those perceived as Others,
most conspicuously so the Jews, but also Germans and other minorities). In a political sense, projects of centralization of power, elitism, and the restriction of pluralism became more prominent (in particular socialist and communist movements were seen as destabilizing), although counter-tendencies, especially in the form of social-democratic and peasantist views of popular incorporation, should not be overlooked. In an ideological sense, a plurality of discourses emerged that often displayed totalizing overtones, in that their primary aim was bringing about ideological closure, pretending to profess the only historically tenable vision of modern society. Indeed, a good part of these alternative discourses questioned the liberal view of the individual as a free-standing, “unencumbered” self radically, and presupposed the need for his/her subjection to the social or collective, while democracy and its nature of compromise was widely understood as unfit for the modern project.

It is evident that such a region-wide movement towards closure cannot be seen as distinct from a wider pan-European crisis of liberalism, rationality, and Enlightenment thinking. In this regard, tendencies towards closure and the radical, civilizational missions of intellectuals in the region (against the West, calling for the purification and radical self-determination of their own people) should be understood as closely interconnected with intellectual and societal trends in western Europe. But it might even be the case, as argued by Arpad Szakolczai, that the excesses of the East have led to the most convincing answers from “truly heroic figures” to the western civilizational crisis (2005), in terms of clear antidotes to and forms of transcendence of nihilism and anti-humanism.

While important differences existed throughout the societies in the region (the Czechoslovakian continuing commitment to constitutional democracy in the 1920s is the most conspicuous), it seems fair to argue that in all societies important movements towards closure were visible. The most important contenders for the liberal project of democracy, rights, pluralism and societal differentiation were obviously fascism and communism. All forms of closure as mentioned in the introduction are of importance here. Ideological closure meant that both fascism and communism denied any claim to knowledge of contending views, in particular of forms of rationalism and scientism. In other words, there was no sense of tolerance for different discourses or reflexivity towards the world view espoused. In cultural terms, it was the fascist project that most clearly absolutized the historical, ethno-cultural community. But also in communism, despite its initial disregard for or trivialization of questions of national identity and culture, there was a clear tendency to eliminate, subjugate, or instrumentalize cultural diversity. In political terms, notions of the fusion of the state and nation in fascism, or the unquestioned role of the vanguard in communism indicate a radical move away from pluralistic views of the political arena towards an emphasis on elitism, and an attempt to bridge the gap between the individual and state, or social groups and the state by eradicating differences. And clearly also in economic terms, the emphasis was on a disillusion with the liberal market economy and a turn to autarky and a centralized, strong state as the main executor of economic development (Chirot 1989).

**Third confrontation: Varieties of communism**

Innate fascist projects with strong totalitarian tendencies that emerged in the region were not able to develop into more structural projects of modernization, and can only
with difficulty be understood as alternative forms of modernity, even if there were clearly modern aspects involved. This was not least because of the abortion of any such projects by the development and outcome of the Second World War, and the subsequent incorporation of the region into the Soviet empire. Communism can be much more convincingly understood as an alternative form of modernity, in particular in the way it developed after leaving behind strong revolutionary overtones, and even more so in the rationalizing and stabilizing turn after Stalin’s death (Arnason 1998: 163; Janos 2000). In terms of its world view, communist modernity had a modernist vocation at its core, in its endorsement of a total reconstruction of society on the basis of a vision of an ideal society. As argued by Harald Wydra, “Marxist revolutionary theory rejected western modernity by trying to fulfil it” (2007: 72).

The modernizing character of the Soviet project seems undeniable (see Arnason 2000), but it is equally clear that an identification of the post-Stalinist regimes with totalitarianism continues to makes sense. One of the aspects that makes totalitarianism an adequate description of the whole of the Soviet project is its attempt to confront key problématiques of modernity by means of an attempt at the reunification of a fragmented society, in particular by means of the erasure of distinctions between state and society, and by offering an alternative, political spirituality as a substitute for religious transcendence (Wydra 2007). In this regard, the post-Stalinist years saw the disappearance of systematic terror, but not the abandonment of invocations of the communist project in favour of a conflictless society and a “new man”, as well as concomitant pressures of totalitarian control of society and the individual. In other words, one of the key imaginaries in communism was the idea that the fragmentation and alienation brought about by modernity could be overcome by a full transformation and reunification of society and a total overcoming of conflict (cf. Walicki 1995). It can be argued that the totalitarian project of communism was about an attempt at full closure. In ideological terms, this was through the transcendence of rival projects (liberalism, fascism) and the endorsement of a superior, historical “truth”, grounded in a combination of a scientific, evolutionary reading of history and Christian eschatological messianism. In cultural terms, closure meant the sidelining of any cultural problématique and the official affirmation of a universalist perspective and the representation of humanity, but gradually also through the partial incorporation (or at least tolerated co-existence) of national symbols and local historical legacies into the official Leninist-Marxist doctrine, or their instrumentalization in order to stimulate declining legitimacy (cf. Janos 2000). In political terms, closure meant the denial of any form of opposition or deviation from the officially endorsed path, most efficaciously embodied by the “enemies of the people” and alleged counterrevolutionary forces, and the adherence to an imaginary of the revolutionary vanguard as the only vehicle with access to higher knowledge. Finally, in economic terms, closure meant the attempt to create a fully self-subsistent regional economic world by means of the imitation of western bureaucratism and industrialism, and a division of labour with regional scope.

The imposition of the Soviet model onto central and eastern Europe meant in itself, even if to various extents, that the strong tendencies for closure in the Soviet project could never have the same hold as in the native lands. In particular in Hungary and Poland, as well as in Czechoslovakia, the imposition was never complete, and rival traditions continued to exist. In Poland this mostly took the form of a patriotic counter-project endorsing the rebirth of the Polish nation, in later stages effectively promoted by the
dissidents of KOR and the Solidarnosc trade union. In Hungary, the aborted attempt at establishing “socialism with a human face” in 1956 re-emphasized a national alternative to the Soviet project that, even if strongly repressed in the wake of 1956, continued to have a strong hold on Hungarian society and continued to function as a symbol for openness and dissidence. And in Czechoslovakia, the relatively strong, indigenous communist movement constituted a basis for continuous tension with the Soviet ruler, while the abortion of any effective deviance in the wake of 1968 did not prevent latent democratic traditions from re-emerging in the 1970s. In a number of communist regimes, but not all, the 1970s and 80s saw then the (re)emergence of dissidence that was involved in the carving out of public space in totalitarian societies, or, in other words, that constituted a confrontation of official closure with informal openness.

But the Soviet project was also challenged by indigenous projects for closure, as was most conspicuously the case in Albania, Yugoslavia, and Romania. In the latter case, the coming to power of Ceausescu in 1965 meant – even if becoming fully visible only at a later stage – the reconfirmation of attempts at pursuing an isolationist trajectory of national communism (as already pursued in the 1950s by Gheorghiu-Dej), with strong tendencies of a cult of personality as well as radical levels of ideological and politico-cultural closure. The particularly totalistic offensive that emerged most clearly at the end of the 1970s included a widescale attempt to rewrite national history according to the canons of national communism and so-called protochronism as well as further steps to make Romania economically independent (as had already been initiated by Gheorghiu-Dej in the 1950s in his refusal to relegate Romania to the position of a peripheral, agricultural producer in the Comecon arrangement).

**Fourth confrontation: Return to liberal modernity?**

The end of the alternative modern project of communism in 1989/1991 has been widely greeted as a return of the region to “normality” and western European modernity. The idea is that rebellious counter-projects have evidently been proven wrong by history, and that liberal modernity has (re-)emerged as the only viable interpretation of modernity. In this regard, the majority of countries in central and eastern Europe have now more or less definitely entered the sphere of western modernity, something symbolically emphasized by the admittance of ten countries to the European Union.

The reading of the “revolutions” of 1989 and the end of communism as a story of opening up and the reduction of complexity in that the region now finally embraces western modernity is not unproblematic. While the collapse of communist societies has without doubt entailed moves towards openness in all regards (ideological, cultural, political, and economic), and has stimulated an undeniable increase in (crossborder) cultural interaction as well as the adoption of western models, the liberal narrative of the end of the Cold War can in itself equally be regarded as a form of cognitive closure. With regard to the specific process of the establishment of liberal democracies in the region, Wydra has recently argued that “[i]n a monistic fashion, theories of democratic consolidation have assigned the totality of representation to ‘liberal’ democracy” (Wydra 2007: 2). The predominant, singular narrative with regard to the post-communist societies is thus a liberal one that includes normalization and the return to Europe, consisting of a narrative line (equally adopted by liberal elites in the region) that involves steady progress, increasing openness (the “open society”), and steadily evolving Europeanization.
The liberal narrative is, however, problematic on a number of accounts. First, as already indicated, the crowding-out of the ideological, cultural, political as well as economic spheres by the liberal narrative overlooks or marginalizes alternative interpretations of modernity, of identity and of modernization that have played a role in the wake of 1989. For instance, in terms of democratic models, discourses and political cultures, it can be argued that post-1989 democratization is characterized by the emergence of multiple interpretations of democracy, partially related to a variegated past, rather than the wholesale adoption of textbook liberalism by elites and citizens alike (cf. Blokker forthcoming). The narrative of the open, liberal society thus only partially corresponds to reality in that liberal monism is challenged by a variety of legacies as well as different narratives of transformation. Dissenting voices have been marginalized, but did not disappear, and distinct legacies continue to play a role. Thus, while in Poland the Solidarnosc legacy is often seen as incompatible with liberal democracy, and its influence as having waned in the post-1989 context, also due to the disappearance of dissidents from the political arena, it can be argued that the legacy still provides an important imagery for the justification and evaluation of politics (Cirtautas 1997). At the same time, the traditional liberal imagery of democracy is challenged in Poland by a nationalist-religious view that invokes a communitarian view of democracy, and even attempts to reformulate ideas of European unity. In the Romanian case, the opening up of society after 1989 involved a relatively restrictive interpretation (“original democracy”); paradoxically, the most violent and apparently thorough rupture with the past led to the highest level of continuity in political elites and a national-communist ideology. By the 2000s, though, a more open form of social-democratic discourse emerged, while a more pronounced liberal and rights-based discourse has become visible, not least in constitutional debates, at least partially contradicting strong deterministic understandings of the Romanian modern trajectory (Blokker forthcoming).

Second, it can be argued that, prior to 1989, it was due to relaxation from above and pressures for opening up from below during the later years of communism that in some societies (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland) alternative narratives emerged around a dual language of human rights and authenticity. While the latter discourse may have become marginalized in mainstream politics in the region, the general significance of dissidence is not to be underestimated, in particular in providing alternative readings of political modernity and modern society, as well as a distinct idea of dissent as a form of modern politics. The latter points to the limitations of liberal democracy in providing a full-blown model for an “open society”, and indicates the impossibility of equating liberal democracy with the “totality” of democratic representations. In other words, a liberal view of the open society is challenged by a latent tradition of “antipolitical politics”.

Third, as has been widely documented, the most evident tendency in the region (and not only there) has been the dual return of nationalism and religion. While many have attempted to explain this return by pointing to a reversal of tendencies towards openness, and a reconnection with a regionwide historical tendency towards closure, the revival of both nationalism and religion – strongly suppressed by communism – can in many instances be better understood as forms of critique and response to the predominant narratives of liberalism and Europeanism, bemoaning the lack of local autonomy, the fragmentation of societies, and the undermining of traditions and social cohesion (even if this is not rarely expressed in endorsements of strong forms of closure, as in right-wing populism).
The return of both national and religious identities equally indicates the problematic nature of a secularist narrative of modernity. The reconstruction of nation-states around dominant national and religious identities is less a reverse in the process of transformation (indeed, in Hungary as well as Poland nationalism was an intrinsic part of dissidence in the 1980s), and rather entails a specific response to the tensions of modernity. What is more, an emphasis on national integration was in part stimulated by the enlargement of the EU (cf. Priban 2007).

To sum up, the state of liminality that characterizes the post-communist transformation has spawned various types of responses to reclose this state of uncertainty and lack of identity. Some of these clearly lean on the prevailing universalistic narrative of Europeanness and liberal democracy, while others more strongly invoke local traditions and identities. In reality, this dual understanding of modernity is strongly intermeshed.

Concluding remarks

The concise and clearly only fragmentary review of successive experiences with modernity in central and eastern Europe cannot possibly do justice to the region’s complex history, but constitutes an attempt to correct the views that either modernity and forms of open society are merely imposed on the region from the outside (in this reading, variety in modern experiences and democracy takes the form of various distances to a West-European ideal type), or that modern experiences in the region are unfailingly compromised by a common, regionwide legacy of closure in terms of ethno-nationalism and totalitarianism.

I have argued that it is more accurate to understand the modern experiences in the region as grounded in a dual tradition of both openness and closure. Endorsements of openness can be related to attempts at establishing autonomous and independent societies (free from imperial heteronomy), and internally to calls for civic inclusion, publicity, and participation. Such emancipatory movements emerged at various times, beginning with attempts to establish national sovereignty in the context of imperial structures in the nineteenth century. And, as is well known, indigenous political projects based on notions of openness equally played a significant role in the undermining of communist totalitarianism, but did not merely entail an importation and reproduction of western rights discourses. In particular in Hungarian, Czechoslovak, and Polish contributions, a variegated but original discourse of “living in truth”, dissent, and self-limitation was elaborated. In the wake of 1989, such discourses have played a less visible and variegated role in the region, but this observation should not lead to the conclusion that democratization and the institutionalization of openness has merely followed a pathway already delineated by western European, liberal-democratic experiences. Rather, multiple democracies have emerged in the region, in particular in terms of a variety of democratic discourses and political cultures.

Endorsements of societal closure emerged most prominently in the context of the interwar formation of nation-states in the region, and were often radically raised against what was seen as the weak potentiality of liberal democracy in integrating the often newly “liberated” central and eastern European societies, and the need for creating a strong sense of national consciousness and belonging in the context of the political inclusion of larger parts of society, in particular the peasantry. The most extreme forms
of closure were proposed in the form of the fascist and communist programmes of modern society, which in themselves constituted radical, alternative replies to the modern problématiques of self-government and inclusion.

While the collapse of communism clearly meant the end of such radical experimentations with totalitarian understandings of political modernity in central and eastern Europe, the post-1989 attempts of institutionalizing “open societies” in the region is characterized by distinct tensions between proposals for openness and closure. Original claims of the triumph of liberal democracy are now increasingly put into doubt, and recently the region’s “crisis of democracy” has been announced, even if a reversal to radically closed, authoritarian societies seems unlikely.

It seems fair to conclude by noting that, while central and eastern European experiences with modernity and the current re-establishment of open, democratic societies do not add up to any full-blown alternative to western modernity and democracy, the region’s experience with modernity can neither be said to be external to the region, nor can its trajectories be exclusively equated with a deviant, flawed legacy of “organized” or totalitarian modernity. Rather, as demonstrated by the experience of multiple democracies since 1989, its experience is one of a duality of openness and closure.

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