



Piyasiri Gunaratna, *Winter in Czechoslovakia*, 1964. © Studio FAMU. The film was presented at *Biafra of Spirit*.
Third World Students in Czechoslovakia in National Gallery Prague, 2017–2018, curators: Tereza Stejskalová in collaboration with Zbyněk Baladrán.

I spent the first half of my life in communist Czechoslovakia, where we only rarely encountered non-Europeans. In a university city – such as my home, Brno – these were mostly university students from “friendly states” in the Third World. Black men were popular in the pubs we used to frequent as students in the early 1980s. There were rumours – and some of these men claimed so themselves – that they had no problem establishing relations with Czech girls. They were few in number, so ordinary Czechs probably saw them as providing variety rather than as posing a threat. Those who started families and settled down here nevertheless complained about racism: their exotic origins and the colour of their skin – often seen positively in non-problematic situations – would become the butt of jokes or worse at the first sign of conflict. Among the students, however, I rarely encountered racism against black people.

Arabs had it worse. It’s hard to say why. Islam wasn’t quite the bogeyman it is today – after all, a number of the black students were also from Muslim countries. Some of the “Arabáci”, as they were derogatorily referred to, would provoke people with their fashionable Western clothing, which was not available to ordinary Czechs. The prevailing view was that they spent their nights in bars picking up Czech girls with foreign currency. Some friends of mine, with whom I shared a critical stance towards the communist regime, connected an aversion to Arabs with sympathy for their Middle Eastern enemy – the Israelis.

This support was further strengthened by the opposing view that the regime took of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Our hatred of the regime led many of us to love its enemies. We tended to consider as false anything that the regime presented as the truth. Its forced solidarity with the struggle of the Third World against American imperialism and Zionism put us on the side of America and Israel. In Western Europe, photos of Palestinian boys throwing stones at heavily armed Israeli soldiers would cause moral outrage and protests. The same pictures, printed on the front page of *Red Justice*, the regime's mouthpiece newspaper, made us suspicious of propagandistic manipulation. If *Red Justice* said it was so, then it had to be a lie. Our sympathies were with the enemy of our enemy.

The regime's criticism of American or South African racism had a similarly perverse effect. The fact that it was communists celebrated by the regime who stood on the front lines of the struggle against racism (for example, Angela Davis in the United States and Joe Slovo in South Africa) shifted us towards the right, which saw the fight against South African and American racism as a tool of propaganda and proof of the Soviet Union's ambitions to dominate the world. Those of us who wanted to free ourselves from the grip of the Soviet regime had no reason to sympathise with the victims of its enemies.

The more or less compulsory collections for "solidarity funds" aimed at supporting the peoples of the Third World, which the communist regime implemented in Czech workplaces, high schools, and universities, discredited both pan-human solidarity and anti-colonialism. As part of its propagandistic self-legitimation, the regime forced upon us a key to understanding the world: the evil, racist West against the virtuous, oppressed South. In our attempts at delegitimising this worldview, we trampled on it by dividing the world into the evil, imperialist East and Central Europe, which was colonised by the East. The idea of a "kidnapping" by the Eurasian empire, as presented in Milan Kundera's 1983 essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe", expressed the feelings of a large number of anti-communist Czechs of my generation. In place of solidarity with the suffering of non-European victims of the West – imposed on us by the East – we, as victims, called for solidarity from the West. We asked the West to pay attention to us as Europeans, just as the Western left became conscious of the need to atone for the suffering the West had inflicted upon non-Europeans. Kundera's appraisal of the colonial crimes of the Soviet East thus came into competition with an appraisal of the colonial crimes of the liberal West. The West had to decide between two moral appeals: helping the victims of the former and compensating the victims of the latter. The former arose from an allegiance to European civilisation, the latter from an allegiance to the human race.

According to some left-wing postcolonial historians,¹ the Central European insistence on a shared cultural identity with the West manifested the presumption of European racial superiority over non-Europeans. But can we consider a society to be white supremacist if the vast majority of its inhabitants have encountered a non-European only a few times in their life, if at all? In the 1980s, most of my liberal-minded anti-communist friends did not feel that whites were superior to non-whites, but their worldview was consistently Eurocentric. To put it in Lenin's terms, this subjective self-centredness had objectively racist implications. Focusing exclusively on one's portion of humanity within the context of humanity's progressively greater interconnectedness meant implicitly attributing a smaller value to the life and suffering of those who did not belong in this group. Even so, within the triumphant atmosphere of the 1990s, and even within the mainstream left in the West, the illusion prevailed that human rights, democracy, and prosperity (to which Central Europe had opened its doors in 1989) would also gradually spread to the nations of the global South. In hindsight, it seems that Boutros Boutros-Ghali, UN Secretary-General from 1992 to 1996, was closer to

1 James Mark, Quinn Slobodian, *Eastern Europe in the Global History of Decolonization*, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198713197-e-20> (accessed January 5th 2020).

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Námět, scénář a režie
VISHWANATH

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY

Krishna Vishwanath, *Black and white*, 1968. © Studio FAMU. The film was presented at *Biafra of Spirit*.
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the truth when he claimed that the abolition of the East–West border only strengthened the North–West border.

After the Cold War ended, the two parts of the global North, which had previously used incentives to compete for the favour of the Southern countries, could concentrate their attention and resources on overcoming the gap between them. For the West, however, this was only relatively true; winning the Cold War also pushed it in the opposite direction. As it increased in importance and power, the West's responsibility in some regions of the South (e.g. France in Francophone Africa or the US in the Middle East) also increased. Some Soviet East countries completely turned their attention away from the South. While the final horizon of the foreign policy of Central European communist countries had been the entire world, for their post-communist successors in the 1990s this horizon narrowed to include only the West: in a feverish struggle to become part of the Western “core”, they did all they could to burn the bridges that connected them to the former Eastern “core” (Russia) and the “periphery” (the South).

Hiding under the universalist rhetoric of the 1989 Central European revolutions lay a particularist project: a return to Europe. Havel's human rights discourse might have sounded global and inclusive, but in reality it identified the planetary reach of human rights with the planetary rule of the United States. This identification had an exclusionary effect on the human rights of those who found themselves on the subjugated side of American power or who were enemies of American regional representatives. So, in fact, the seemingly universal horizon of pan-human values had clearly defined borders, which were identical with the borders of particular American power, supposedly aimed at disseminating these values around the world. Havel's discourse did not apply to the human rights of those who were in conflict with American power (or its clients). In the last years of his life, Havel defended Israel against those who criticised it for continuing with the occupation and the trampling of the human rights of the Palestinians.

Havel, who in some of his essays written at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s masterfully deconstructed the traps of the Manichaean bipolarity of the Cold War, fell into these traps himself after the conflict ended. His identification of the universal with the particular – pan-human moral principles with the special interests of America or the “Euro-Atlantic” civilisation – corresponded to the ways in which many anti-communist liberals of my generation experienced their entry into the world, which had been kept from them by a closely guarded border until November 1989. Subjectively, we felt like cosmopolitan people finally released from our communist prison. We set off for the Western metropolises. Some of us were unpleasantly surprised to find that these were full of non-white immigrants from the former colonies. We lacked the historical context to understand their struggle for recognition and against discrimination. After all, for many of us, Western colonialism was propaganda invented by the Soviet Union to draw attention away from its own colonialism and its victims (us).

During the 2015 refugee crisis, the states of the Visegrád Four (V4) refused to fulfil their international humanitarian commitments and to participate in the acceptance and distribution of non-European refugees. Some Western statesmen responded with surprise, as if these states had disowned the universal values of human rights and pan-human solidarity to which they had claimed allegiance in 1989. But only those who had forgotten the Eurocentric motivations of those revolutions could truly be surprised. The Central Europeans were returning to “their” Western civilisation, which, by allowing them to return, confirmed that it was the centre of the world. The rest of the planet and humanity was considered peripheral, and the Central Europeans did not want to belong to the periphery: the necessity to assimilate Western norms and adopt neoliberalism was often justified as essential to avoid slipping down to the level of a “developing country”. The former Second World was to be divided into those who managed to join the First World and those who were demoted to the Third World. The primary objective of the Central European nations was to secure their place in the first group and avoid slipping into the third group at all costs.

Refusing entry to non-European refugees in 2015 was therefore certainly not a negation of the legacy of 1989; quite the contrary, it was a continuation of this legacy within a new historical situation. In September 2015, when the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, tried to arouse a feeling of moral obligation towards non-European refugees in the V4 countries by reminding them that Western Europe had accepted Cold War refugees with open arms, he encountered a solid wall of incomprehension: from the Central European perspective, Western Europeans had a duty towards these refugees as members of the European civilisation, which is incomparable to the much smaller duty (if any) we have towards the refugees of an Islamic civilisation.

In 2015, then, Eurocentrism finally came centre stage after hiding behind a universalist rhetoric since 1989. An ordinary nationalist and civilisational xenophobia appeared under the noble humanist façade. This took place after our 1989 dream of belonging to the West came true. If we now partake in the huge advantages that Europe gained from centuries of direct and indirect dominion over non-European peoples, we cannot avoid our commitments to these peoples. By taking our sought-after place among the former colonists, we have lost the alibi of the colonised. The decolonisation of our thought can finally begin.

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