
New Nomads and Migration Literature

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On Wednesday 30 April, the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague hosted a lecture by Dr. Hans-Christian Trepte, from the University of Leipzig, entitled 'In Search of a New Freedom: New Nomads and Migration Literature.' In his lecture, Dr. Trepte discussed a series of books relating to the issues of exile and emigration, and the links between travel and culture.



Dr. Trepte opened by introducing the books he wanted to discuss, included works by Eva Hoffman, Phillip Marsden, Czeslaw Milosz, Radek Sikorski, and Anne Applebaum. All of these books related to Central and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, all of which represent experiences of travel or displacement. Dr. Trepte followed by discussing different types travel: the differences between exile and emigration, for example; various forms of nomadism; notions of expelled or displaced persons; religious pilgrimage, and about the effects all these types of travel can have on the cultural identity of an individual. The notion of identity was introduced, not as something inherent, but as something fluid and changeable, and something which can be affected positively or negatively by various forms of travel. Travel can be positive because it can be enriching; it encourages the traveler to absorb new cultures and experiences, but it can also be negative, because it can leave travelers stranded between cultures, belonging to neither their original culture nor the one they have moved into.

Dr. Trepte discussed these negative effects with reference to the literature, much of which deals with the themes of East-West migration and the difficulties in adapting to new cultures. He touched on orientalist themes, discussing how Western arrogance and ignorance can turn the East into a terra incognita, a strange and notably foreign land ultimately characterised only by its most prominent features. This ignorance can lead to peculiar misconceptions (Shakespeare's mention of a Bohemian Sea in his play *The Winter's Tale*, for example) or to negative stereotypes (such as Goethe's assertion that Czech, rather than being a language, is merely a throat disease - a thought which I'm sure every Erasmus student here can relate to on some level!). Those who travel from East to West often find themselves "lost in translation", stuck between cultures, forever needed to explain their origins to those surrounding them. This ignorance and arrogance was only exacerbated by the division of Europe following the Second World War, and carries on even to this day.

Dr. Trepte's talk was somewhat nebulous and meandering, but I nevertheless found it interesting and, at times, relevant to my own life and experiences. As an Erasmus student, I found it easy to relate to the topic of how travel can change a person, and I remember my own changing reactions to living in a foreign country: how I too, went from feeling out of place and isolated in Prague to immersing myself in Czech culture, enjoying it, and considering myself at home here in the Czech Republic. I've also faced my own share of mistaken stereotypes about Eastern Europe from people I know back in the UK: I still sometimes have to remind relatives that I'm living in the Czech Republic, not Czechoslovakia, and that life out here isn't still marked by the inadequacies of Communism. It was interesting, as someone who has travelled from West to East, to hear about the common perspectives and experiences of people who have gone from East to

West. Of course, our own individual experiences are all unique, but it is interesting and refreshing to hear the similarities common in everyone's own tales: we all have our own beginnings and our own endings, but the common emotions we experience along the way reminds us we're all human; we're none of us so alone as we can sometimes think.



Natalie James is an undergraduate history student at University College London, currently studying at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. Her interests include history, literature, politics, and current affairs. She joined the online magazine I-Forum to become more aware of and involved in student life at Charles University in Prague, and also to meet other likeminded Erasmus students.