

It's in Milan Kundera's ambiguities and contradictions that we find his truths

Sunday 30 July 2023, by [MALIK Kenan](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2023).

The novelist, who died last week, posed questions on identity that resonate to this day

The novelist, Milan Kundera [once observed](#) to fellow-writer Philip Roth, “teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question”. He feared that in a world in which people “prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than ask... the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties”.

The death last week of Kundera has been marked with [respectful eulogies](#). Yet the lightness with which he has been remembered has also made clear that he no longer occupies the place in our culture he once did. Kundera's voice, too, has less resonance in our noisy world.

Born in 1929 in Brno, in what was then Czechoslovakia, Kundera joined the Communist party at 18, buoyed by the possibilities of socialism in the wake of Nazi occupation and the Holocaust.

“Communism enthralled me in much the way Stravinsky, Picasso and surrealism had,” [he wrote](#) decades later. “It promised a great, miraculous metamorphosis, a totally new and different world. But then the Communists actually took over my country, and a reign of terror set in.”

Expelled from the party in 1950 for “anti-party activities”, he nevertheless rejoined and remained a member until expelled again in 1970 after the crushing of the Prague Spring by Soviet forces. Five years later, Kundera left for France, eventually becoming a French citizen.

Kundera's reputation was at its zenith in the 1980s, when there was something urgent in his exploration of survival in the face of totalitarianism. In a series of novels, from *The Joke*, written in the early 1960s but not published until 1967, to his most celebrated work, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, published first in French in 1984, he laid out with bleak humour the conflicts and absurdities of living under Stalinist rule. As the cold war has receded into the background, both Kundera's themes and his style have seemed to belong to a different age. Many critics have focused on other, less admirable, traits in his writing, in particular his hostile, even cruel, treatment of female characters.

There is, however, at the heart of Kundera's work, in his essays as much as his novels, another set of ideas and reflections that are as vital to today's world as his evisceration of totalitarianism was in the 1980s: his exploration of the relationship between culture, history, memory and identity. They are vital not because they provide concrete answers to the questions we face but because, as with much of Kundera's work, they are laced with ambiguities and paradoxes that help better illuminate those questions themselves.

In a series of novels, he laid out with bleak humour the conflicts of living under Stalinism

“The identity of a people and of a civilisation is reflected and concentrated in what has been created by the mind – in what is known as ‘culture’,” Kundera wrote in *A Kidnapped West*, [an essay](#) first

published in 1983 in the influential French journal *Le Débat*. It was the development of an argument that Kundera had nurtured for many years.

Culture, he had suggested almost two decades earlier, in an address to the Czech Writers' Congress in 1967, was vital "to justify and preserve our national identity". Only through protecting "language and identity" could small nations sustain their "values".

The nations of central [Europe](#), Kundera believed, had to preserve not just their specific cultures but also their attachment to Europe. The "tragedy of central Europe", though, was it had been swallowed up by the Soviet Union, and so "vanished from the map of the west", but that "disappearance remained invisible", almost unnoticed. Why? Because, Kundera argued, Europe itself was "losing its cultural identity". There existed "an immense loneliness... the void in the European space from which culture was slowly withdrawing".

All this might read like a deeply conservative vision of culture and identity drawn from European Romanticism, from the idea that every people is defined by a unique history and culture that had to be protected from outside encroachment. Yet, as with much of Kundera's thinking, nothing is quite so straightforward. While insisting that national culture was vital "to justify and preserve our national identity", Kundera was also deeply hostile to the idea of cultures being confined by national boundaries. He took as his motto Goethe's belief that "national literature no longer means much today", because "we are entering the era of *Weltliteratur* - world literature - and it is up to each of us to hasten this development". The "inability to see one's own culture in the larger context", Kundera denounced as "provincialism".

Indeed, for all his insistence on the need to preserve the distinctiveness of central European nations, Kundera was sceptical of the very idea of a "home" or a "homeland". "I wonder if our notion of home isn't, in the end, an illusion, a myth," [he suggested](#) in an interview. "I wonder if we are not victims of that myth. I wonder if our ideas of having roots - *d'être enraciné* - is simply a fiction we cling to."

Kundera's conception of Europe could be equally paradoxical. He talked not of "eastern Europe" but always of "central Europe", to distinguish more sharply the divide between east and west, to emphasise central Europe's attachment to the west, and to present Russia as un-European, as constituting "a whole other world".

There is a long tradition of viewing Europe as a singular cultural entity, as a way of denying "Europeanness" to certain peoples, whether Jews or Slavs in the past, or Muslims today. Many on the right today deploy the idea of a single, homogenous Europe, to condemn immigration as eroding the whiteness of the continent, and as [robbing Europeans](#) of their "homeland".

This vision of Europe is, though, a world away from Kundera's. "My own ideal of Europe," he wrote in a striking phrase, was that of "maximum diversity in minimum space".

What Kundera is wrestling with in all this is the issue that continually confronts us today: that of trying to make sense of the relationship between the local and the global, between the particular and the universal, between finding refuge in inward-looking identities frequently rooted in intolerance and exclusion and embracing a cosmopolitanism that often celebrates the erosion of community and democracy.

In the ambiguities and paradoxes of his writing, in the questions he poses as much as in the answers he provides, Kundera warns against being fixated by one side of that relationship to the neglect of the other. That, above all, is why his writings still matter.

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