

ENSURING COMPATIBILITY, RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

Alexander Kiossev

In *Culture and Imperialism* Said argues that the empire is a phenomenon that unifies the world like nothing before. The 19th century colonial process whereby Europeans governed 85% of the surface of the Earth preordained the fate of the planet. This, by contrast and analogy, can also be claimed about the postcolonial condition—the most significant contemporary global event is the decade-long decolonisation, the disintegration of colonial empires, the challenging of political domination, the economic power and cultural hegemony of the West, the rise and fall of local nationalisms and the emergence of new local modes of resistance against them, as well as new supra-national, de-territorialized postcolonial alliances and solidarities.

Postcolonial thought is propelled by the conviction that those processes and their contradictory heritage (rather than the games of consumption and media simulation or the neoliberal uncontrolled mobility of capital) are the global condition of the contemporary world. It sees them as the defining factor added to all micro—and macroprocesses people live within. This framework is contradictory; the West does not easily give up its dominant, hegemonic place, the postcolonial nations do not have their own economic resources or independent cultural codes, and yet in this difficult process billions of people are emancipated, autonomous cultures are developed, new, alternative subject positions are being opened, the old ones are being used and negotiated in a new way besides the reproduction of old and the production of new traumas, hierarchies and oppressions. The postcolonial societies have to deal with the continuing cultural hold of their heavy heritage (*The Empire Writes Back*) and yet they have an alternative vision of their own development, giving life to their own modernities, which do not always follow the pattern of Western standards. The latter successfully decentres the hegemonic role of the West, provincializes Europe, creates a critical distance towards local nationalisms, deterritorializes identities, creates a multiplicity of hybrids, diasporas, networks, challenges ‘the new world order’ and the US claims to global leadership.

On the other hand, what happened in and after 1989 with the Cold War, the Soviet Bloc and communism seems no less global in its dimensions and consequences. The only social order that aspired to be an alternative of the Western colonial and liberal capitalism disintegrated with the collapse of the Soviet empire that was called upon to implement it. Of course, it was ‘an empire’ only in the metaphorical sense of the word, but still there were a number of stunning analogies with the colonial formations—especially with regard to the authoritative, military and ideological asymmetries between the Soviet center and the East-European, Asian and even African peripheries. What happened in Eastern Europe was not merely the loss of totalitarian power and cultural hegemony of the communist idea; it had the status of a ‘philosophical’ phenomenon, a philosophical catastrophe—as everybody knows many people interpreted this development as the collapse of Utopia, the disintegration of the great Marxist Narrative, the loss of transcendentality. In other words, the disintegration of the ‘real socialism’ compromised or at least

seemed to compromise all alternative, critical and social engineering projects. From the perspective of this disintegration the left Marxist project and the attempt at its implementation seemed to be an alternative, failed version of the great universalist and emancipatory narrative of the European Enlightenment. It was indeed an alternative of the liberal capitalist project, but it could still reproduce the asymmetrical imaginative territorializations of the universalist Eurocentrism postcolonialism is fighting against, *the constitution of the Other as the shadow of the Self (Europe)*. When one speaks about the end of alternative projects, he should also remember how in the early nineties some even claimed that the 'end of history' had taken place, i.e. the only possible Western model of liberal capitalism had won and there was no chance of any new, different 'philosophical' projects about the future.

Well, one could add after Said that people are simultaneously living in postcolonial, post-imperialist and post-socialist times. The question is : how to combine these diverse global perspectives—and whether they are at all compatible, whether they are truly global.

For those of scholars working on the history of modernity in Eastern Europe such questions have serious consequences—both intellectual and practical. The above considerations imply that a post-socialist situation like the one in Bulgaria should not be interpreted merely in its own categories and appearances. It can and must be seen in the postcolonial key as well, because its context cannot be fully grasped without being inscribed in the contradictory networks of the global condition. Only the correlation with this global condition could tell us whether 'the loss of philosophical hope' experienced by East-Europeans contains any planetary message or merely constitutes another (in this case negative) Eurocentric generalization of a partial and idiosyncratic local experience used by the West for the colonization of world imagination, this time through the experimental fate of its East European periphery. To convince the world that there are no more alternatives, that history as a whole follows a single entropic path.

From a practical angle the comparison between the postcolonial and post-socialist experiences would certainly uncover the anticipated differences between incomparable societies and traditions, but maybe it will also reveal some unexpected similarities. They could produce unexpected knowledge from unexpected positions and open new opportunities for the self-representation of East Europeans. This in turn could shed new light on the global configurations themselves and assist us in understanding both ourselves and the dynamic and multidimensional planetary mosaic. To quote Spivak, *there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close of our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self. ...to confront them is not to represent (vertreten) them but to learn to represent ourselves.* If anything the contact between the postcolonial and the post-socialist perspectives, the two extra-hegemonic but radically different perspectives opens new opportunities for both - by rearranging their notion of themselves in the confrontation with the heterogeneous Other they could learn to present /darstellen/ themselves and their project in a contradictory globalizing world full of conflicting, mutually challenging perspectives.

Here I will take the risk of citing just one important similarity and one (perhaps even more significant) difference between the post-socialist and postcolonial situations.

The similarity is that post-socialist countries are also in a traumatic situation, i.e. just like the postcolonial countries they are forced to deal with a heavy and lingering heritage. In some respects it resembles colonialism. A gigantic machine of control and government has disintegrated—the Soviet bloc, whose functions resembled and even transcended those of the colonial empire. For five decades it imposed a powerful centralized administrative/police order and surveillance; it spied on, exploited, disciplined and terrorized its own populations, making claims for a unique historical Utopian mission (actually an excuse for the isolation of the Eastern bloc from world processes, for the militarization of social life and the demonizing of the West). In practical daily life the communist utopia was slowly transformed into an automated ideology, ‘a life within a lie’ (Vaclav Havel). The cliched routine codes of the latter started playing the role of a centralized ‘language in power’, an all-defining cultural code with an all-pervading and all-controlling power. This ideological code has transformed in its image the institutions of knowledge-production (academic science, applied science, statistics, the court, the media and the public sphere), displacing the production of truth and subverting the equation between knowledge and power. It meddled with insane megalomaniac social engineering projects in the industrial and technological development, it set artificial boundaries to the market and consumption (the so-called planned deficit), it subjected the functioning of the institutions to a double logic, ideological/bureaucratic or ideological/professional. Its heaviest heritage is the traumatic individual and collective identity, which today must absurdly exist in the conditions of a ‘new world order’—the accession to the European Union and the unquestioned hegemony of the United States which are torn between their isolationism and their function of a world exporter of democracy, market liberalism, Hollywood culture and military might.

The latter ensues from the following inherited conditions. Under the surface of the automated, desemantized (like a catachresis) and all-pervading public ideology of official communism there were a various individual and collective counter-projects ranging between the polarities of full collaborationism, on one hand, and radical protest, dissidence and an attempt to ‘live within the truth’, on the other: between those polarities there was a heterogeneous specter of strategies of self-isolation, a daily/consumptive adaptation to communism, the creation of material ‘oases’, attempts at building a ‘socialism with a human face’, at anthropological adoption and assimilation, besides a huge bundle of individual and group variations of simulation, semi-resistance, strange subjective actions, etc. As a result the post-socialist society inherited the lack of shared constitutive norms that could warrant a non-traumatic creation of identity; it inherited dissents, a chaotic heteroglossia, the practice of living within different and incompatible narratives—to put it in the language of postcolonial theory and poststructuralism, it is a structure that leads to the creation of various traumatic identities (I hereby use the classical notion of trauma - a retrospective morbidity caused by the inability to inscribe a certain event into the dominant cultural code, to give it explanation and meaning). Therefore, although communism as an idea no longer exercises a cultural hegemony on Eastern Europe and no longer possesses social imagination (except as a demonized or comical memory), it constantly transpires that just like the colonial empire it never

departed in full. Unsurmounted, it lingers in different points of social space - as traumatic personal narratives, as dissent, a memory lapse, an inability to narrate one's own life, as a non-sovereign individual longing for a father figure that could guarantee orientation, security and safety while taking away sovereignty and freedom. To the lingering 'past within the present' we must of course add an inherited deformed professional and institutional culture of behavior: it is enough to remember the socialist phrase 'they pretend to be paying us, we pretend to be working'; the inherited distorted forms of social trust (low trust in institutions, high trust in informal networks), etc. To paraphrase, we can say that in political, economic, institutional and cultural life the Socialist Empire writes back, the East-European peoples being unable to cope with its heritage.

The difference between the post-socialist and postcolonial situation lies in the different inherited perceptions of the world hegemony. For postcolonial populations, Europe and the West are colonizers in the full range of their colonizing functions - i.e. they colonize simultaneously and coherently in the areas of power, institutions, practices, symbols and social imagination. Two centuries ago they sent out conquistadors, settlers and missionaries who conquered the lands with military power. Settlers turned into governing elites that destroyed the local ones or forced them to cooperate. They kept their economic, political and administrative ties to the metropolitan center and implemented its policies, imposing a specific colonial administrative order. They started an economic policy of asymmetrical development of the colony based on its concrete natural resources, gradually transforming it on one hand into a specialized source of a particular kind of raw materials, and on the other hand into a market of their own technological products. The real conquest and the establishment of the colonial order is accompanied by the establishment of the cultural hegemony of the European metropolitan center over the colony: of the Christian/European missionary ideology that justified colonization as a civilizing act, of the colonizers' elite subculture and its normativity, of the creation of power-knowledge, the colonial institutions of knowledge (anthropology, geography, cartography, the history of local lands and cultures, statistics, demography and sociology), as well as cultural institutions (libraries, museums, educational systems, cultural canons, official colonial languages, etc.) producing knowledge and identities for the local populations from a colonial perspective and using it to serve the practice of its government. They reproduce the available Eurocentric cultural codes, forcing the 'subjects' to identify with the subordinate cultural positions in the hegemonic cultural order.

For East-European countries 'Europe' and 'the West' have rarely played the role of a real colonizer; instead, they were colonizing the imagination in its peculiar disjunction from imperial practices of governmentality. This is due to the fact that the Balkan part of Eastern Europe has been under the real power of two other empires—the Ottoman and the Soviet, which were the practical agents of centralized power, the real management of administration and knowledge, of discipline, ideological and police control and punishment. In other words, these non-European empires had been the sources of real power and violence, were it administrative or epistemological. But the paradox is that neither the Ottoman Empire nor the late USSR had a grip on the imagination and affective economy of these peoples which from the moment of their emergence as

modern nations had perceived, narrated and discussed themselves as part of 'Europe', yet a part that was backward, miserable and deserted by Europe proper. 'Europe' was for them less a real, imposed and foreign imperial order than an Ideal Empire, a longing for completeness, a fantasm of the fulfilled identity, a symbol of the basic values of the unquestioned universal, i.e. eurocentric order of revolution and enlightenment: Freedom, Fraternity, Equality, Enlightenment, Progress, Civilization. The eurocentric symbolic order has rarely been subjected to serious trials in such East-European contexts—apart from marginal elitarian debates, it was the figure of consensus in these countries which (unlike actually colonized peoples) did not have the chance to experience in their own histories that this symbolic order was inseparable from the economic, military and administrative power of the West. In this context the European universalist ideology has the status of a shared phantasm, a figure of desire. The West is thus present as a figure of Desire—the desire 'to belong to Europe', 'to be recognized by Europe'—rather than the whole complex of colonial functions cultural hegemony is part of. As a result of this and the lack of actual colonization 'Europe' is not perceived in the figure of the obvious Enemy but in the figure of the big Other that continues to disregard us—except in the cases of radical nationalism.

In the last few years the peoples of Eastern Europe are in an unprecedented situation: they have joined or are soon to join the European Union which accepts them not for cultural but for economic and geopolitical reasons. In other words, the imagined ideal 'empire' will soon turn into a real agent of a very practical governmentality requiring the practical adaptation of legislations, statistics, standards and bureaucratic procedures, efforts at real standardization, normalization and inscription. We could presuppose that this transition from the Empire of imagination to the Empire of knowledge-power will trigger a serious cultural conflict that could have other analogies with the colonial and postcolonial processes.

My current note aspired only to prompt the beginning of a conversation about the compatibility and differences between the postcolonial and post-socialist situations; it can end here. In conclusion we have to consider who the speaker is, in what context, from what institutional position. The speakers are the East-European academic elites who have so far been the agents of the imagined europeanisation of Bulgaria and are now facing the risk of being marginalized by real europeanisation; in this sense they are paradoxical subaltern elites, simultaneously (former) voice-owners and unable to speak, i.e. having no chance of being heard by the hegemonic western center. They have been the agents of a constitutive self-colonization (constitutive because the Bulgarian nation does not exist before it but emerged through it). They are currently seeking alternative places and codes, which would give them a position for speaking, for criticism and alternative projects. They are in complex, multiple relationships :

1. Simultaneously employing and trying to deconstruct the neo-liberal dominant discourse of the European accession, which marginalizes them
2. Trying to enter into a dialogue with the attractive postcolonial political and intellectual agenda yet being forced to renegotiate and rewrite canonical postulates of the post-colonial reasons in order to be able to use them as catachreses for the reconstruction and representation/*darstellen*/ of their experience. They are also tempted to transmit to this postcolonial reason the need of "unlearning Marx".
- 3.

They are in a complex relationship to their own East-European masses. There are two reasons for that. The first is that these East-European subalterns have a higher authority/hegemony; they are inclined to disregard the local elites, to 'skip them' as an authority (turning directly to the real or imaginary Europe), thus divesting the elites of their classic privileged position of the universal witness, observer and judge. The second reason is that the elites are trying to play a therapeutic role for the masses which are captivated by the dominant discourses of American-style mass media culture—to articulate the shared oppressed, displaced and deformed past experience, to reconstruct a painful memory and self-evaluation (i.e. to learn to represent themselves in the sense of *darstellen*)—and they meet with the characteristic 'resistance' of the patient as the masses do not accept the role of the patient and prefer to forget real socialism rather than try to remember and understand it.

For these contradictory reasons the academic elites can probably form tactical alliances and solidarities with the postcolonial critics—but only at the price of new splits and heterogeneities of the 'subaltern' category—adding to its dispersed character their specific East-European and global experience, searching for their message and claiming to be able to speak.

???