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**IS THE “COLONIAL” IN “POST-COLONIAL”  
THE “SOVIET” IN “POST-SOVIET”?  
THE BOUNDARIES OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES<sup>1</sup>**

*By way of preface: how far to the East should transitology travel?*

Between spring 1994 and winter 1995, *Slavic Review* hosted a polemic on the viability of a transitologist comparative approach to post-1989 East-Central Europe which opposed Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, on the one hand, and Valerie Bunce on the other. Whereas a full-length discussion of their respective positions falls outside the scope of the present paper, a brief overview of their main assumptions is not without interest, since it points out to the tension between the need for conceptualization and generic/ structural models of interpretation in the emergent field of postcommunist studies, and the caveats against reading postcommunist realities with an inattentive eye to theories and methodologies designed to account for the historical evolutions and cultural productions in distant and (radically) different territories.

Initially framed as a debate between proponents of transitology and area studies specialists<sup>2</sup>, this “conflict of interpretations”, as Paul Ricœur would have it, soon turned out to be more of “a debate among comparativists about comparative methodologies”<sup>3</sup>. The arguments involved may therefore serve as a cautionary introduction to the discussion of the postcolonial-postcommunist connection in the following sections of this article.

Schmitter and Karl’s main working assumption is that, provided the events and processes related to the regime change in East-Central Europe “satisfy certain definitional requirements”, their occurrence should be regarded as pertaining to the same “‘wave of democratization’ that began in 1974 in Portugal” and swept Southern Europe and Latin America:

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<sup>2</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Attempt to Go?”, *Slavic Review*, 53, 1994, 1, pp. 177-178.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Bunce, “Should Transitologists Be Grounded?”, *Slavic Review*, 54, 1995, 1, p. 113.

...all these cases of regime change – regardless of their geopolitical location or cultural context – should (at least hypothetically) be regarded as parts of a common process of diffusion and causal interaction<sup>4</sup>.

This overarching comparativism is set in stark opposition with an approach unwittingly presented by Schmitter and Karl as typical of area studies specialists, namely the stress placed on “the cultural, ideological and national peculiarities of these cases”<sup>5</sup> which causes former Sovietologists and scholars of East-Central Europe to reject theoretical instances of “acultural extrapolation”, and thus run the risk of taking “refuge in *empirie* – in the dilligent collection of facts without any guidance from theories and models”<sup>6</sup>.

In making a case for the reading of democratization in East-Central Europe within the broader framework of transitology, Schmitter and Karl argue that, the particularities of the region notwithstanding, such an inclusion would serve firstly as an indicator of how well transitology can actually travel, and secondly as a kind of photographic developer able to convert the latent East-Central Europeanness into a visible image:

Only *after* (and not *before*) this effort at incorporation, mapping and analysis has been made, will it become possible to conclude whether concepts and hypotheses generated from the experience of early comers should be regarded as “overstretched” or “underverified” when applied to late comers. Only then will we know whether the basins containing different world regions are really so interconnected and moved by such similar forces. The particularity of any one region’s cultural, historical or institutional matrix – if it is relevant to understanding the outcome of regime change – should emerge from systematic comparison, rather than be used as an excuse for not applying it<sup>7</sup>.

The interesting point here – as far as my understanding is correct – lies with the relationship between comparativism and similarity. Normally, comparative methods are used to establish a relationship between at least two objects or phenomena based on their similarity; or, to put it differently, it is the extent of similarity which determines whether the elements thus analyzed are to be treated similarly. On the contrary, when difference overcomes similarity, the conclusions of comparative research are usually considered to be unhelpful, if not utterly misleading.

This is, in fact, the crux of Valerie Bunce’s argument against a traditional transitologist approach to East-Central Europe. In her opinion, the differences between transitions to democracy in Southern Europe and Latin America and

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<sup>4</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “The Conceptual Travels”, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 177.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

regime changes in East-Central Europe – as catalogued in much of the scholarly work on the subject, and aptly reviewed by Schmitter and Karl<sup>8</sup> – are so important in number and quality that the benefit-cost ratio of adding East-Central Europe to comparative studies of democratization becomes highly questionable.

Is it really so? Perhaps it doesn't even matter so much. The way I see it, arguing for or against the notion that only that which is comparable should be compared is far less interesting than trying to analyze how such comparables are constructed, for what kind of audiences, and to what purpose. In other words, what is at stake here is not so much to justify the usefulness of the comparison *per se* as to come up with effective ways of performing it.

From this perspective, we can distinguish between two different manners of tackling the postcolonial-postcommunist connection. The first one would be to see it as an *opportunity* to expand a field of investigation or advance a specific agenda, based on the understanding of theory as an explanatory model which can be used to account for realities or phenomena outside its initial area of emergence; for commodity's sake, I suggest to call it "the traveling theory approach". If, on the other hand, we choose to deal with this comparison in terms of *challenge*, theory will appear more like a body of situated knowledge, and research will therefore focus on the various factors that shape it and on the "cognitive dissonances"<sup>9</sup> produced by theoretical displacement. While the former approach seems quite well suited for those who support the notion of postcoloniality as a global condition, the latter – which, in the traces of Mieke Bal<sup>10</sup>, I'm inclined to dub the "traveling concepts approach" – is interested in bringing forward "not an essential quality but rather the multiple and shifting forms"<sup>11</sup> that a given element in the original configuration may take when analyzed in a different context. The main focus here is not explanation or classification but the laying bare of mechanisms of thought at work in the very operation of creating models and configurations. In classical rhetoric, this approach would go by the name of *topic*, in the Aristotelian sense; today it might be described as a form of conceptual analysis by means of successive displacements.

Now, do we really need this distinction or is it yet another clever exercise in hair-splitting which does little to further our knowledge of the subject matter at hand? Since both of the approaches briefly discussed above are, on the whole,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 179-184.

<sup>9</sup> Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*. Translated by Janet Lloyd, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*, p. 28.

comparative methods for dealing with a problematic relationship, is it so important to decide what kind of comparativism are we talking about? Is there, in the particular case of the postcolonial-postcommunist connection, sufficient reason to choose one over the other? In order to answer these questions, it would perhaps be useful to see what happens when they are ignored.

### *Competing colonialisms*

A case in point is the way in which Anne McClintock, for instance, thought to include the USSR among the established modern European empires. In her 1992 article "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'", McClintock distinguishes between *internal colonization* ("where the dominant part of a country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony") and *imperial colonization* ("large-scale, territorial domination of the kind that gave late Victorian Britain and the European "lords of humankind" control over 85% of the earth, and the USSR totalitarian rule over Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century")<sup>12</sup>.

At the time of publication, the sheer mention of the USSR in the context of modern European imperialism was nothing short of revolutionary, given that the general tendency up to that point had been to meet this equation with anything from fierce rejection to "deflected silence"<sup>13</sup>, especially among the practitioners of postcolonial studies. McClintock's article, therefore, marks a welcome opening up of a new investigative field by allowing for a shift in focus from the workings of overseas imperialism to alternative dispensations of imperial-like power.

*How* she does that, though, may be subject to debate – although I would like to emphasize that my misgiving here is not with the substance of her article, but rather with the inadequacies of the theoretical vocabulary at hand.

While *imperial colonization* is defined as a form of territorial expansion and the subsequent production of specific power relations, *internal colonization* can be read as a reenactment of the respective power relations *inside* the original boundaries of a nation-state (the subjectification of entities socially or geographically defined: "a group or region") or *outside* those boundaries, but in the absence of actual territorial annexation. Writing from within the field of postcolonial studies, albeit in a critical fashion, McClintock uses this distinction to further her own purpose, which is

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<sup>12</sup> Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'", *Social Text*, "Third World and Post-Colonial Issues", 31-32, 1992, p. 88.

<sup>13</sup> David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique", *PMLA*, 116, 2001, 1, p. 117.

...to question the orientation of the emerging discipline and its concomitant theories and curricula changes, around a singular, monolithic term, organized around a binary axis of time rather than power, and which, in its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism, runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power<sup>14</sup>.

In other words, the above distinction is meant, on the one hand, to challenge the reduction of the various political and cultural experiences of the former overseas colonies to what is commonly perceived as their dominant characteristic, namely their shared experience of European colonization; and, on the other hand, to emphasize the enduring presence of colonial practices even after actual territorial appropriation has ceased, if it ever existed at all. Within the limits of her article, *imperial colonization* stands for the “classical” expansionist *model*, while *internal colonization* is meant to describe *alternative*, more insidious and oftentimes overlooked, examples of political, economic, cultural or military “imperialism-without-colonies”<sup>15</sup>, chief among which are the United State’s distinct forms of domination since the 1940s. When articulated onto colonial history proper, McClintock’s distinction between imperial and internal colonization could therefore be read as a distinction between pre- and post-independence colonialisms.

Given the fact that she is interested in the variations of post-independence colonialism rather than in the competing models of empire, her mentioning of the USSR among “the European ‘lords of the humankind’” on the same grounds as Victorian Britain is almost perfunctory. In fact, the article contains no further reference to Soviet colonialism – when she does mention the Soviet Union, it is in relation to the collapse of the regime and the subsequent demise of the master narrative of communist progress<sup>16</sup>. But if read with an eye to the workings of pre-independence imperialism or to the possible relationships between (post)colonialism and (post)communism, the USSR’s presence on the list of “old” imperial powers is not so unproblematic as it appears to be.

There are, in my view, two main issues pertaining to the construction of McClintock’s distinction which are worth discussing, and both of them are related to the prominence of the spatial idea in defining imperial domination. On the one hand, describing the USSR’s rule over the Eastern Bloc as an example of *imperial colonization* is, in the light of her definitions, rather confusing: although the USSR was indeed a large-scale territorial unit, its satellites in East-Central Europe remained, unlike the former Soviet republics, independent entities (their respective

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<sup>14</sup> Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress”, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 95-96.

degrees of independence greatly varying, mostly due to local factors). For all intents and purposes, what we are dealing with here is in fact a *non-territorial* form of colonization which, in McClintock’s own terms, would qualify as *internal*<sup>17</sup>. One might therefore wonder why she would use an example which undermines her distinction, instead of replacing it with a more adequate one in the same category, namely the Russian Empire. Both historically and ideologically, Tsarist Russia has more in common with the European empires it has sought to emulate than it is the case with its Soviet successor, and if McClintock’s intention had been to overwrite the distinction between continental and overseas empires it would have served her purpose just as well. Another intriguing question is why McClintock has decided to liken the USSR with precisely Victorian Britain (purposefully singled out among the other “European ‘lords of humankind’”, possibly as a paragon of modern imperial expansion, and the most frequent reference in the vocabulary of postcolonial studies) rather than, say, France or King Leopold’s Belgium, the authoritarian nature of which would have been closer to Soviet totalitarianism (incidentally, Stalin is said to have despised British colonial administrators for their “toothlessness”). And finally, why bring to the fore the Soviet Union’s domination over the Eastern Bloc as an example of imperial colonization, when the annexation of the Baltic States, for instance, would have made a far less debatable case?

There are many possible answers to these questions. The first possibility is that McClintock hasn’t given much thought to such matters, in which case the USSR – “the prison-house of peoples”, as it was sometimes called – is inventoried here as the last empire to have fallen, the chronological conclusion of pre-independence, territorial imperialism (a premature celebration, as the Chechen wars and, more recently, the Crimean and Ukrainian crises would prove), regardless of the peculiarities of its actual domination over the former Soviet republics and satellites, respectively. Secondly, and least probably, McClintock may have used the USSR as a synecdochal designation for the whole history of Russian expansionism, in which case the designation is misleading, because it obscures the significant discontinuities, both in discourse and in practice, between the Tsarist and the Soviet colonial models, especially with regard to the former Eastern Bloc. Thirdly, she may have intentionally likened the USSR to Victorian Britain, in order to postulate some significant similarity between Soviet totalitarianism and European imperialism – a risky decision to be made without a minimal theoretical justification, since the general tendency up to the mid-1990s has been to

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<sup>17</sup> For that matter, internal colonization is a familiar enough concept in both Sovietology and Russian studies: widely used in Russian historiography in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it has enjoyed a second life in Soviet times and it is still very much in use. For a thorough analysis, see Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011.

thoroughly distinguish between the two. And finally, she may have had the intuition that there is “something imperial” about the USSR’s relations with its satellites, but not the means to adequately define imperialism otherwise than in spatial terms.

This brings me to the second issue raised up by McClintock’s distinction. Although she sets to the task of addressing the ineffectiveness of the theoretical vocabulary of postcolonial studies<sup>18</sup>, she does not challenge the spatialization of empire, i.e. the prevailing definition of imperial colonization in terms of overland expansion. Her preoccupation is chiefly with time (as encoded in the post-ness of postcolonialism), but the case she makes against a concept which is misleading because it is “organized around a binary axis of time rather than power”<sup>19</sup> and therefore reluctant “to surrender the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular and ahistorical abstraction”<sup>20</sup> can also be dressed against the conceptual agglutination of postcolonialism around the alternative axis of space.

If anything, the prominence of the territorial expansion as a distinctive feature of imperialism is indicative of how ideological predispositions shape the methodologies, instruments and vocabulary of postcolonial studies – and it is precisely that which sometimes makes it difficult for theories to travel. Traveling theories are never neutral; when transplanted, traces of the original context and previous constructive constraints are always palimpsestically present. Perhaps this is why (post)communist realities can hardly fit into postcolonial categories without causing them to implode. Soviet colonization is highly idiosyncratic; Soviet imperialism, as we have seen, is not “proper” imperialism, neither are former Soviet republics or satellites “proper” colonies. Cultural practices are exasperatingly different, as David Chioni Moore is forced to admit<sup>21</sup> even as he struggles to demonstrate that “the term ‘postcolonial’... might reasonably be applied to the formerly Russo- and Soviet-controlled regions post-1989 and -1991, just as it has been applied to South-Asia post-1947 or Africa post-1958”<sup>22</sup>. Shall we then abandon all hope for an effective comparative approach?

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<sup>18</sup> Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress”, pp. 85-88.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> “However, when one chats with intellectuals in Vilnius or Bishkek or when one reads essays on any of the current literatures of the formerly Soviet-dominated sphere, it is difficult to find comparisons between Algeria and Ukraine, Hungary and the Philippines, or Kazakhstan and Cameroon” (David Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?”, p. 117).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115.

In my opinion, comparison still stands a fair chance, even on such shaky ground. It is also true that adjustments might be in order. If postcommunist realities cannot fit into postcolonial categories, perhaps the respective categories could do with a little dusting off. A good place to start would be to suggest complementary or alternative definitions for concepts already put to widespread use by postcolonial studies – empire, colony, ambivalence, etc. – based on their use in East-Central European literature, historiography, and bureaucratic discourse: the kind of work Oțoiu does for “liminality”<sup>23</sup> or Alexander Etkind for “internal colonization”<sup>24</sup>. Such an approach, far from showing just a narrow, parochial interest in localities, could help expand and make more flexible the conceptual framework of postcolonial studies by opening up a dialogue between various context-shaped understandings of the terminological inventory<sup>25</sup>.

Another possibility to tackle comparison on fruitful grounds is to “think postcolonially” about (post)communist issues<sup>26</sup>, i.e. to use postcolonialism not as a *theory* (in the “strong” sense), but as a *perspective*, a way of organizing research around a set of central preoccupations – the dynamics of power within a given society, the discursive strategies deployed to control and transform territory, the marginalization, displacement or dispossession of various groups, strategies of identity (re)construction, and suchlike – already addressed by postcolonial studies,

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<sup>23</sup> Adrian Oțoiu, “An Exercise in Fictional Liminality: the Postcolonial, the Postcommunist, and Romania’s Threshold Generation”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23, 2003, 1-2, pp. 87-105.

<sup>24</sup> A similar treatment is applied by Ioana Zirra to the concept of *hyphenation* in her article for the current issue of *Dacoromania litteraria*.

<sup>25</sup> The usefulness of such an approach is largely proved, albeit for a different context, by Barbara Fuchs’ “Imperium Studies: Theorizing Early Modern Expansion”, in Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren (eds.), *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval Through Modern*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. In her essay, Fuchs argues that the term “empire” is intrinsically polysemic and, given its rich history, it “denotes both internal control of a polity and external expansion beyond that polity’s original boundaries” (p. 72). While postcolonial studies usually privilege the more familiar meaning of “a political entity made up of geographically remote states”, there are certain cases – Tsarist Russia and the USSR among them – where we would be better advised to bring to the fore earlier, secondary meanings such as “the political relations that h[o]ld together groups of people in a political body” (p. 72). This would do away with some of the terminological difficulties arising from territorial definitions of colonization and put an end to the ongoing debate about the validity of comparing continental with overseas empires, while at the same time triggering an increased awareness of the analogous features of empires which are not normally addressed by comparative studies.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Cristina Șandru, *Worlds Apart? A Postcolonial Reading of post-1945 East-Central European Culture*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012 and Bogdan Ștefănescu, *Postcommunism/ Postcolonialism: Siblings of Subalternity*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2012.



while being able to freely use whatever methodologies are most adequate for dealing with the cases in point.

The particular issues raised by the collapse of the Soviet regimes in East-Central Europe can also be used to reinitialize, re-invigorate, and develop existing debates about our understanding of modernity, state construction, civil society, solidarity, and so on<sup>27</sup>. The transformations brought about by the “posting” of socialism are not limited to the region behind the former Iron Curtain – the collapse of “actually existing socialism” is, as McClintock has aptly suggested, also the demise of a master narrative of progress and emancipation which requires important theoretical adjustments in Western thought – a task made all the more urgent by the resilience of the socialist utopia among influential voices within the field of postcolonial studies<sup>28</sup>.

What I am trying to say, in fact, is that the postcolonial-postcommunist connection may be addressed in ways that do not require comprehensive justifications of postcommunism as a “postcolonial condition”. Postcolonial studies have familiarized us with the difficulties of theorizing diverse spaces; and, in my opinion, the effort required by such a conflation would be better spent on producing alternative conceptualizations of the kind suggested, for instance, by Stenning and Hörschelmann<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> William Outhwaite and Larry Ray, *Social Theory and Postcommunism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Aijaz Ahmad, “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality”, *Race and Class*, 36, 1995, 3, pp. 1-20; Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies. A Materialist Critique*, London – New York, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Alison Stenning and Kathrin Hörschelmann, “History, Geography and Difference in the Post-socialist World: Or, Do We Still Need Post-Socialism?”, *Antipode*, 40, 2008, 2, pp. 312-335.

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IS THE “COLONIAL” IN “POST-COLONIAL”  
THE “SOVIET” IN “POST-SOVIET”?  
THE BOUNDARIES OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES  
(Abstract)

The post-1989 transition of East-Central Europe to capitalist democracy has focused much scholarly attention on the political, economic, social, and cultural trajectories of the countries in the former Soviet bloc and on the fostering of new identities within a wider, European or global, context. Yet the ‘transitologists’ attempts to establish transregional comparisons that would tackle the similarities and differences between postcommunist territories and former colonies were met with deflection and silence among the proponents of postcolonial studies. With very few exceptions, Western scholars were rather reluctant to count the USSR among other, mostly European, “modern empires”. Still, the postcolonial sensibility of people in the Soviet sphere – as documented by oral history, sociological investigation, and cultural analyses – is hard to ignore. In the last few years, the postcolonial-postcommunist connection gained momentum in East-Central European studies, as part of the reflective attempts to translate a specific historical and cultural experience into one of the most widespread theoretical idioms in current academia. In doing so, East-Central European scholars interrogate the limits of an increasingly canonical discipline and join in its critical revaluations by measuring colonialism against other systems of domination.

*Keywords:* postcolonial, postcommunist, post-Soviet, postcolonial sensibility, cultural dependency.

ESTE „COLONIALUL” DIN „POSTCOLONIAL” „SOVIETICUL” DIN  
„POSTSOVIETIC”? LIMITELE STUDIILOR POSTCOLONIALE

(Rezumat)

Tranziția Europei Centrale și de Est, după 1989, la democrația capitalistă a atras atenția mediului academic asupra traiectoriilor politice, economice, sociale și culturale din fostul bloc sovietic și asupra configurării de noi identități în cadrul unui context european sau global mai larg. Cu toate acestea, demersurile „tranzitologilor” de a stabili, prin comparații transregionale, similitudinile și diferențele dintre teritoriile postcomuniste și fostele colonii au fost întâmpinate cu rezervă sau trecute sub tăcere de către autorii studiilor postcoloniale. Cu foarte puține excepții, teoreticienii occidentali s-au arătat reticenți față de includerea URSS-ului în rândul celorlalte „imperii moderne”, majoritatea europene. Sensibilitatea postcolonială a populației din sfera sovietică – ilustrată de istoria orală, de studii sociologice și de analize culturale – este totuși greu de ignorat. În ultimii ani, relația dintre postcolonial și postcomunism a devenit importantă în studiile central și est europene, ca parte a demersurilor speculative de a traduce o experiență istorică și culturală specifică într-unul din cele mai răspândite idiomuri teoretice din cadrul mediului academic. Procedând astfel, teoreticienii din Europa Centrală și de Est explorează limitele unei discipline canonice aflate în plină expansiune și contribuie la reevaluările sale critice, resituând semnificația colonialismului în raport cu alte sisteme de dominație.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* postcolonial, postcomunist, postsovietic, sensibilitate postcolonială, dependență culturală.