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Impostors and Wardens. Lost in the Peripheral Trap of Identity

Annotation: The focus of this paper is particular trap in Polish identity narrative and its politics as framed, not only by its rhetoric, within center-periphery and postcolonial discourse. While strongly focused on regaining dignity and agency, said narrative – as is argued there – is not only unable to archive its goals, but in effect its outcomes are the opposite. Strengthening dependency and effectively leads to inability to act as an actor with its own agency. In this paper the main topic of the inquiry are entangled relations between an actual narrative position of the Poland (and in general: region), and selected current identity narratives: the perpetual victimness, post-communism, and the dependency one.

Keywords: identity, post-colonialism, Poland, cultural history, post-communism

Oszuści i Strażnicy. Zagubiony w peryferyjnej pułapce tożsamości

Streszczenie: Przedmiotem tego artykułu jest szczególna pułapka widoczna w narracji polskiej tożsamości i jej polityce w ramach, nie tylko retoryki, w centrum peryferii i dyskursu postkolonialnego. Choć jest ona mocno skoncentrowana na odzyskaniu godności i niezależności, wspomniana narracja - jak się tam dowodzi - nie tylko nie jest w stanie zarchiwizować swoich celów, ale w rzeczywistości jej wyniki są odwrotne. Wzmocnienie zależności i skutecznie prowadzi do niezdolności do działania jako aktor we własnej agencji. W niniejszym artykule głównym tematem dowodzenia są splecione relacje między faktyczną pozycją narracyjną Polski (i ogólnie: regionu), a wybranymi aktualnymi narracjami tożsamościowymi: wieczna ofiara, postkomunizm i uzależnienie.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość, postkolonializm, Polska, historia kultury, postkomunizm.

Самозванцы и Хранители. Затерянный в периферийной ловушке идентичности

Аннотация: В центре внимания данной статьи находится особая ловушка в польском нарративном повествовании и его политике в рамке не только его риторики, но и внутри периферии центра и постколониального дискурса. Несмотря на то, что основное внимание уделяется восстановлению достоинства и активности, указанное повествование - как утверждается там - не только не в состоянии архивировать свои

цели, но в действительности его результаты противоположны. Усиление зависимости и эффективно приводит к неспособности действовать как актер с собственным агентством. В этой статье основной темой исследования являются запутанные отношения между фактической нарративной позицией Польши (и в целом: региона) и выбранными текущими нарративными нарративами: вечной жертвой, посткоммунизмом и зависимостью.

Ключевые слова: идентичность, постколониализм, Польша, история культуры, посткоммунизм

Introduction: the uncertainty

During the last decades the status of Central and Eastern European countries (and in more general form: regions) has become fiercely contested territory, sometimes even in literal sense of the word. There are many reasons for that state of the matters. From political interests and divisions, problems arising from social changes, external and internal clashes between particular factions inside these countries (and also between them), conflicting imaginations and memory, up to still existing territorial disputes, identity problems, clashes with minorities and contesting views. Even within the academic discourse the topic is, as one could say: „the messy one”. The situation in addition is complicated by unclear „nature” of the region in general. Numerous books and papers discussed that matter and the number of such publication is still growing.

Such status is not surprising if the one take into account that the matter not only is a ground for research and study, but also a part of actively developing, often dangerous political situation and also a personal history, sometimes dramatic and sometimes dangerous, too, for the people living there. This element, while constantly present, is not raised very often as particular experience constantly shaping the image of the region, countries and people. Not only as the „object” to research but also the experience and condition of the researchers themselves, especially these not only interested in topic but also placed *inside* it one way or another.

While it is safe to say that the „Central Europe” as also „Eastern” (and it’s middle form: „Central-Eastern Europe”) are particular historical constructs and Wolff’s book *Inventing Eastern Europe*¹ in a quite convincing way shows how these construct came to life within a Western (also scientific) imagination, the process how these constructs became alive inside these regions in numerous ways is still a matter of debate and as Tomasz Zarycki pointed out, avoiding some kind of *Orientalism trap* while writing about it is nearly impossible². This topic has become inquired in Poland in numerous ways during the last two decades³ and which seems to be even more important: has become also

¹ Wolff Larry, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 1994, see also: Delanty Gerard. *Inventing Europe. Idea, Identity, Reality*, St. Martin Press, NY 1995

² Zarycki Tomasz, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge, New York 2014 p. 3

³ However it’s presence, form and particular dating can be (and is) debatable. One of the most interesting attempts to use literature and cultural field in this context was the book of Maria Janion (*Janion M., Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2006), and the beginning debate is usually identified by certain papers of Claire Cavanagh (*Cavanagh C. Postkolonialna Polska. Biała plama na mapie współczesnej teorii*, „Teksty Drugie”, 2/2003, p. 360–71, and: *Postcolonial Poland, „Common Knowledge”, 10(1)/2004, p.82-92*). Ewa Thompson placed *Polish subordination from Russia (and So-*

a part of political and social narrative. Researching both similarity and diversity in the postcolonial narrative about Central and Eastern Europe and its comparability (or not at all) to the classic Said's concept of *postcoloniality* is still contested, however. Said complications arises both from inside and also outside the scientific field (in very general manner of speaking). It's not surprising taking into account the sole political intention of empowerment the *subordinated* and ambition to deconstruct the very structure of subordination, an ambition present in the postcolonial discourse from its very beginning. Also, during the half of century of said discourse presence its usage and the research fields strongly shifted from its mainly literature's field and emancipatory origins.

There are many elements making the Central-European discourse unclear and very divisive in that context. The nature and form of dependence in which countries and territories of that, very broadly outlined region existed and still are. The multiple powers of historically varied, different strength exercising their dominance there with obvious and unavoidable clashes between them. Particularity of failed, local powers, like Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and its still present even if in spectral form in the region. Economical and development problems emerging not from relatively recent (or just: recent) history, but from the very *dependence* relation itself, constructing the historical and present Europe as it was and is. However, if it could be said so, maybe one of the hardest (locally) pill to swallow is that peculiar status: being these *better subordinated*.

That last element has a certain weight emphasised by (for example) Jan Sowa's *The Other Republic is Possible*⁴. Even in context of subordination and dependency relation to the European core – mainly identified by Western historical powers – these dependent and so often underdeveloped regions still were beneficiary of colonial power of theirs overlords, even if only in derivative forms. It's even more visible and clear now than it has been, let's say a century or two ago, while it was mainly (as for example: the „colonial goods merchandise“) experience of middle and higher classes, therefore: limited in range. But now, even those seriously engaged in the political dependency narrative, who emphasises particular necessity for increasing independence (or whatever it could be seen as such) from oppressive masters, for example: European Union overlord, can see that it's great difference on which bank of Mediterranean Sea one is standing, not mentioning benefits of participation in the Schengen Area. It would not be very risky to say, that like through looking glass, the immigrant crisis, and almost *unisono* declared defiance in the region against, in practice, any form of humanitarian

viet Union) experience in that context (Thompson E., Trubadurzy imperium. Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm, Universitas, Kraków 2000, English version: Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism, Westport, CT and London: Greenwood, 2000). Precise dating is rather not really possible, such reflection in different scientific fields (history, economy to name a few) was raised much earlier. For example, Immanuel Wallerstein, creator of one of centre-periphery theory was under strong influence of works of Witold Kula (particularly: Kula W., Historia, zacofanie, rozwój, Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Czytelnik, Warszawa 1983, Kula W., Teoria ekonomiczna ustroju feudalnego. Próba modelu, PWN, Warszawa 1962). An interesting insight offers in that matter Anna Sosnowska's book Zrozumieć zacofanie. (Sosnowska A., Zrozumieć zacofanie. Spory historyków o Europę Wschodnią (1947-1994), Trio 2004). Interesting and strongly contested view presented Jan Sowa (Sowa Jan, Fantomowe ciało króla, Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą, Universitas, Kraków 2011), one of the few authors dealing seriously with Polish imperial (and colonial) heritage. See also referenced there Tomasz Zarycki's papers and books. It's safe to say that in Poland, the topic reached areas far beyond its traditional literature field and context.

⁴ Sowa Jan, *Inna Rzeczpospolita jest możliwa!*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warszawa 2015

involvement, shows that particular feeling of being part of that *better world*, even if it's not the best piece of it.

That mixed experience is probably one of the most important parts of common Central and Eastern European identity, if there's one – as *the one* – at all. If it's referred as uncertainty of place: „are we a part of 'the West' or 'the East', and what these directions *really* means?“, of culture or rule and self-representation: dominant/submitted (and for whom?) not mentioning all problematic tropes of self-esteem and recognition. Within omnipresent imagination, and said omnipresence is probably easiest to find within a school books, well controlled and managed transmission of proper, desired ideas at last for the last few centuries, „the West“ was a place of stable, certain identity, even if religiously, economically or politically almost always in turmoil. And while „the East“ might be seen as paradoxical: a *wild*, romanticised as unpredictable strange land of monsters and brave, if peculiar, pioneers and also a place of strange yet at the same time familiar culture, its image was also mostly solid. But that strange, unclear territories in-between: not entirely Slavic, not Catholic or Orthodox enough, not civilised nor barbaric in a proper way, while strongly alien for the Western gaze, or at last that what could be the one, said territories not only were for the centuries the part of it territorially but also important element of its political and economic balance.⁵

Said mixed experience may be seen (and usually is) as a historical burden which constantly puts these regions, and in consequence: particular countries, and theirs populations, to this very day in uncomfortable existential *limbo*. Neither *civilised* enough to be a partners nor *barbaric* enough to be just subjects of civilisation process. The „incompetent“⁶ at best. Not surprising then, that the particular, and every so often also peculiar, *quest for identity* is one of the dominating narratives there.

Blurry territories and an impostor syndrome

One of the Alexander Kiossev's paper: *Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures*,⁷ is often referred as a kind of framework, however not always openly, for dependency inquires and particular consequences of colonial (or para-colonial) relations between the Eastern and Central Europe and the West, and also – at last for some degree – relations between that region and local historical hegemons (like Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). That paper reflects on the way how members of subordinated cultures, disputants from periphery, used to see themselves and relations in which they exists.

⁵ Todorova Maria, *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009

⁶ The term „civilisational incompetence“ was introduced by Piotr Sztompka (Sztompka, P. *Civilizational incompetence – the trap of postcommunist societies*, „Zeitschrift für Soziologie“, 22/2 1993, p. 85–95) as a description of universal and unavoidable, ashe argued, inherent problems of former Soviet subordinates. As pointed out by Jozsef Böröcz (Böröcz J., *Introduction: Empire and Coloniality in the „Eastern Enlargement“ of the European Union*. [w:] Böröcz J, Kovács M. (ed.), *Empire's New Clothes. Unveiling EU Enlargement*, Holly Cottage: Central European Review, s. 4–5; e-book: <http://aei.pitt.edu/144/1/Empire.pdf>) it may be read as one of many, almost classic in form, self-colonising intellectual descriptions.

⁷ Kiossev Alexander, *Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures. Art and Culture in PostCommunist Europe*, Pejic B., Elliott D. (ed.), Stockholm 1999, Moderna Museet, p. 114-18. See also: Kiossev A., *Self-Colonizing Metaphor, Atlas of Transformation*. Tranzit 2011. online: <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html>

That *peripheral Gaze*, however is a peculiar one. It would be easy to just put subordinated in the frame of the *Western Gaze*⁸, and while at first glance it creates that clear image of oppressed, oppression and oppressors, which easily could be found in many so called „conservative“ narratives, such point of view lack an actual insight. While being useful political tool, a tool, that is, used by reactionary (disguised, indeed, as „conservative“ ones) local political factions, it actually works as a form of veil. What Kiossev, among others, points out is a construction built by the subordinated themselves, however not entirely similar to the (for example) Bhabha⁹ *comprador* theme. The basic difference comes from distinct structures of dependence relations. Bhabha refers to the relation between the Western colonial power and subordinated, offshore colonies, while such relations results with deep internal connections on the both sides, the colonial distance *is* the actual distance. With Central and Eastern Europe region, that said (colonial) distance does not function as separative „far far away in the distant land“ narrative supported by „obvious“ racial discourse, which does not means, that there is no such one involved. Moreover, while the typical colonial relation may be (and usually is) reflected as dominance-submission in its exploitative form, when the Metropolis exploits, for example, natural resources (including the human ones as with slavery) of its colonies and as element of that exploitative relationship there are lines clear drawn, between the *white man* and *oriental subject*, that difference works differently in the European case.

As Kiossev wrote, pointing out one of the layers of that difference: Since the „laterality“ of these marginal societies was only relative, their elites typically shared rather concrete and wide-ranging practical relations (and conflicts) with various European markets, institutions, agents, technologies, commodities, merchants, etc. this allowed them to have quite sober assessments and criticisms toward the west, which sometimes might even come to the extremes of civilizational mistrust or radical „*Kulturkritik*.“ On the other hand, „Europe“ played the role of the Big Other, a peremptory cultural authority indispensable in their self-identification. This triggered the perception of Europe through a double lens: it was both empirical and transempirical. the „self-colonizing“ ones might just as well criticize „Europe,“ yet their criticism could never reach the ravaging anticolonial bile of those colonized in real terms.¹⁰

The Central-Eastern Europe has never been close enough to become a part of the *proper* Europe and at the same moment: it also never has been far away enough to become *properly*, fully alien.

Of course, the „Europe“ itself in said quote and this paper is not the geographical or political entity as such, but a sphere of imagination. And as I pointed out in elsewhere¹¹ these „double lenses“ about which Kiossev is writing, are probably better described as set of multiple mirrors placed at different angles, moving and twisting in time. What the West is seeing (as its image of Central or Eastern Europe) is a product of common work. And the same rule is at work on the other side. Eventually, both images:

⁸ And, at last for some degree: within *the Eastern Gaze* if for the example's sake the Russian view might be treated as one.

⁹ Bhabha Homi K., 1984, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, „October“ 28 1984, s. 125-133; also: *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London & New York 1994

¹⁰ Kiossev A., *Self-Colonizing Metaphor* (online)

¹¹ Kubiak Adam, *Rzeczy mniejsze. Dysformia i fiasko: semi-peryferyjne formy kultury*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, Rzeszów 2015.

that of „the West” and that of this strange Eastern and Central Europe area, are created as common effort enveloped in each other multiple times. The effect: these images of the West, the Central, the Eastern (etc.) Europe – and eventually that transcendent entity „the Europe” itself – are more blurry than clear. And that blurriness, every so often recognised as an integral part of the „messy” territories between the *proper* West and the *proper* East, should be recognised in fact as an integral, yet displaced, part of the West self-recognition. However at the same time, said „not enough” distance, results in a peculiar way in which effectively subordinated Eastern and Central European elites recognise themselves. A phenomena which Kiossev called „self-colonization”. But while Kiossev (and also many others using the term „imitation” for example) stresses out the role of the Big Other¹² – he did not emphasised enough these intertwining „mechanisms” of common imagination of each other *self-ness* and theirs rule for creating and enhancing local hierarchies.

For that part works of Rafał Smoczyński and especially Tomasz Zarycki¹³ are indispensable. Especially Zarycki, who in numerous papers¹⁴ points out how deeply local elites’ self-recognition and social identities are engulfed by local factional challenges inside local clashes between dominant (and also aspiring for domination) factions. Being European, especially in a *proper* way, which every so often means: ability to control how that said way is presented, works also as a tool to control local social hierarchies, and also as Merje Kuus has shown¹⁵, a way to control external images of particular society, country or faction. In its progressive form it often a matter of control (and create) internal *difference* between classes, more or less effectively determining social divisions, at last on the symbolic level. The stake there is presented as *modernity* and *modernisation effort* functions both as a measure tool and the method. While in its (in general) conservative variant, said stakes are built around (mostly) anti-modernisation local integrity of „tradition” (or rather: what is presented as such), and that said integrity takes place of modernity in measurement and social (and also racial, if applicable) division procedures.

However, at the end of the day, both of these (simplified obviously) forms are entangled in its own „self-colonization” imagery. As for the idealised Western better *Others* (which does not stop them from cynical exploitation of said *Others*, whenever it seems to be possible), as for themselves, and finally: it’s own subordinated¹⁶ – they still are not truly enough, let’s say „European”, „cultural” or „civilised”. That quest for

¹² Kiossev invokes there Lacan’s concept of the Big(Grand) Other, rooted in Freudian idea of the *Desire of the Other One*. Such matrix was (and is) commonly used as a tool for deconstruction of colonial imagery and dominance-submission structures.

¹³ Smoczyński Rafał, Zarycki Tomasz, *Totem inteligencki. Arystokracja, szlachta i ziemiaństwo w polskiej przestrzeni społecznej*, Scholar, Warszawa 2017

¹⁴ See for example: Zarycki T. *Peryferie. Nowe ujęcia zależności centro-peryferyjnych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2009, also: *Kapitał kulturowy. Inteligencja w Polsce i w Rosji*, Warszawa 2008; *Peryferie: Nowe ujęcia relacji centro-peryferyjnych*, Warszawa, 2010, and mentioned before *Ideologies of Eastness...*

¹⁵ Kuus Merje, *Geopolitics Reframed: Security and Identity in Europe’s Eastern Enlargement*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2007; also: Kuus M. *The Ritual of Listening Foreigners. Appropriating Geopolitics in Central Europe*. (in:) Parker N. (red.) *Geopolitics of Europe’s Identity: Centers, Boundaries, and Margins*, New York 2008.

¹⁶ It leads, especially inside clashes of local hierarchy and concurrency for domination between factions to effective alienation of dominant groups.

identity, as in its progressive form, where it means to be the one of the true European (modernised, civilised etc.), and also its conservative or reactionary one, where for example truly European values were betrayed by the West and needs to be restored from its original, locally preserved, native form, and also theirs other numerous variants, become eventually futile resulting in so common, as I dare to call it: the *impostor syndrome*.

Said *impostor syndrome*¹⁷ reveals itself in a few common ways, which could be called, for the example's sake, „tactics” as an opposition of broader in range and also more complicated in structure „strategies”. As an example a few may be recalled easily, namely: 1. symbolic embrace, 2. cynical exploitation, 3. ideological repositioning, and 4. symbolic denial. The first and the last may be seen as each one extremis on the political (and ideological) axis. Where „embrace” would be typical for so called „liberal, modernist” faction, while „denial” for „conservative”, and „anti-modernist one”.

However, one could not be fooled by said opposition. In ideological and political reality that difference is minor if – for the closer look – non-existent at all. As Romana Kolarzowa pointed out, in practice, that difference has mostly aesthetic value.¹⁸ The second and third in similar way are present around that axis, however such positions are more fluid. For example anti-modernist conservative faction can be very successful in cynical exploitation (of which one could suspect mostly these „cynical liberals”) while the liberal and modernist one may be strongly oriented in efforts for ideological reposition (which effectively make them so close to the reactionary narrative, that they often lose the very resemblance of their identity). In general, these two example tactics are focused on effective exploitation internal-external dynamics of dependence relation. While symbolic economy of the first and the last has, indeed, as primary: symbolic role, the middle two are more operational oriented. A good example of these tactical moves may be a way how *de facto* anti-European factions try to use the symbolic and economical (or political) power of European Union, for its own, particular interests, often openly hostile for EU politics or interests, not mentioning the symbolic image of that said European Union.¹⁹ These tactics, in practice, builds more complex, layered structures (let's call them as its said before: the „strategies”), which eventually may outgrow their base narrative effectively overwhelming its creators. In effect, creating these peculiar, sometimes even ridiculous (at last for the outsiders) narratives, where strongly

¹⁷ I call that the way used to create the *peripheral character*, an always „not ready” actor, which should be distinguished from the „imitation discourse”, such as I'd rather place as one of the method of creation and sustain local social divisions. The „imitations” serves as description of non-authentic (failed) efforts for, for example, modernisation or sustain the tradition, and as such, creates a division (every so often: social one) between „true” form and its imitations. In consequence: between these blessed with truth and insight and these able only to imitate them. This is local, internal narrative and both parties belongs to the same society, and they connect with the „true form” by symbolic proxy, while *impostor* exists and functions in direct relation to the representative of the *Other*.

¹⁸ Kolarzowa Romana, unpublished conference paper: *Liberalizm magiczny, czyli Rzeczpospolita III/IV*, Konferencja Filozofów Krajów Słowiańskich, Boguchwała 2005.

¹⁹ It should not be particularly hard to find, for example, in Polish or Hungarian latest governments' political decisions, or presented narratives, elements of said cynical exploitation or ideological repositioning. However, one should remember that while Polish and Hungarian examples are currently probably the most prominent and „exemplary”, indeed, such tactics and strategies are nothing particularly new. While these two countries has grown recently as the primary „ugly children” of the European Union, the Slovakia (for example) kept that torch before, for many years.

reactionary faction along with the modernists and authoritarians presents themselves as „moderate reformists” inside European (as in this example) symbolic image, defending said Europe against hostile, internal or (and) external forces, yet also *against* that very European image (as for example containing the „liberal democracy” as one of its core symbolic elements).

However these tactics, as also sophisticated strategies, while may be, at last for some extend, effective for a while, particularly in playing with internal (local) images of struggling factions, in the end such strategies puts them at the very alien, even for theirs supposed allies, place.²⁰ In whichever way they try to be *properly* civilised (e.g. European), they always fails. Not entirely because the West is denying them that theirs „rightful place”, as conservative ones would complain, or because there are not enough competent or modernised yet (which would be the liberal narrative), though it happens, but above all: because they sentenced themselves to fail in the first place.

As one could say, the problem is, these Central and Eastern European constant „interns”, which are trying so hard to be as the valedictorians of progressive change, or wardens of hidden (or lost) true European values, are failing because they are trying to aim in certain symbolic image, which is always *elsewhere*. Which effectively places them, as Jozsef Böröcz²¹ pointed out, regardless of intentions and efforts in constant race, doomed to failure. Eventually, they’re always caught as pretending to be *someone else*. And there is certain irony that this situation emerges not only in external relations (for example with these *true Europeans*) but also internal ones, resulting in alienation from theirs own community.

The peripheral identity trap

The existential question of the place and nature of character the region is often addressed after Kiossev’s recognition as internalisation of crucial, symbolic distinctions like: centre-periphery, civilised-uncivilised, or proper-invalid, originated in that particular form in the West, by the Eastern-Central European elites. Kiossev call this self-inflicted trauma, not without a reason. However it would be grave mistake to follow the flock of conservative oriented writers who, as pointed out by Dorota Kołodziejczyk²² or Stanley Bill²³, practically intercepted the postcolonial discourse in Poland.

²⁰ Rather unfriendly relations between (for example) French National Front and Eastern-Central European conservative parties is one of instances of such alienation. Effectively, in the practical political allegiances as ideological ones, for *properly* Western (which means: ones whose Western identity, for themselves, is above doubt), even reactionary, parties, such movements and theirs strategies are alien, unrecognizable, even hostile at its core, which seems to be not so far from the truth, indeed.

²¹ Böröcz Jozsef, *Hungary in the European Union: „Catching Up”, Forever*, „Economic & Political Weekly”, XLVII(23) 2012, p. 22–25, also: Böröcz J., *Goodness Is Elsewhere: The Rule of European Difference*, „Comparative Studies in Society and History”, 2006, January (48,1) p.10-38

²² Kołodziejczyk Dorota, *Comparative Posts Going Political – the Postcolonial Backlash in Poland*, w: *Unforeseen Constellations: Reading Postcolonial Poland with South America*, **Polish Studies Center Indiana University** (2017) p. 12-22. (conference paper)

²³ Bill Stanley, *Seeking the Authentic: Polish Culture and the Nature of Postcolonial Theory*, (2014) online: nonsite.org/article/seeking-the-authentic-polish-culture-and-the-nature-of-postcolonial-theory also: *Position Paper: Postcolonial Theory and Poland*, w: *Unforeseen Constellations: Reading Postcolonial Poland with South America*, **Polish Studies Center Indiana University, Bloomington** (2017) p. 56-64. (conference paper)

That said interception, while demonstrated as a way to strengthen local (in this case: Polish) identity, and a tool of symbolic resistance against foreign domination – figures not new, and well developed in numerous ways in the region as a whole, in fact as I'd argue²⁴, for the most part is used for creation of conservative controlled, and socially reactionary in spirit, identity project. In effect, originated from left-oriented critique (with varied strength) of colonial domination (and centre-periphery relation as a whole), that, among others, postcolonial narrative became dominated by right-wing politics and its narrative. Bill argues²⁵ that this shift was founded on the ground of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *strategic essentialism* a concept of strengthening subordinated self-recognition and self-respect by invoking theirs particularity as singularity, the idea from she has turned back later recognising its misuses. While that project was aimed mainly as a operational tool it has never been meant as an element of nationalist's discourse, which eventually happened.

The important part of this shift in the region (and especially in Poland) was recognition the Russia (and its Soviet Union incarnation) as a colonial oppressor. Such transposition: reading dominance and subordination as a colonial domination, a topic for which in the Polish postcolonial discourse works of Ewa Thompson laid maybe the most significant foundations, allowed to introduction of contextually problematic categories like Bhabha's *compradors* (collaborators) or *colonial mimics*. Legitimising its already present uses in the political frame. And while such transposition is rather strongly debatable,²⁶ it has been (for no surprise) taken as gospel by right-oriented writers and politicians.

Putting aside purely theoretical problems which such shift brings to the table, its main use was to strengthen the ideological division described by Mirosława Grabowska as *postcommunists-division*²⁷, which she interpreted as the main framework for recognising and understanding the political division narrative in Poland. In such a way, when „post-communists” – however the use of this term became more frivolous, the more time from the fall of Soviet domination passed, and always was (and still is) instrumental – are not opponents, but also subservient for former hegemon, distinct *species*, unable

²⁴ I raised this problem before, aside referenced book (*Rzeczy mniejsze...*) see for example: Kubiak A. *Postkolonialne Polski: szkic z niepewnej natury*, „Polonistyka. Innowacje”, 2018/8, p. 125-145

²⁵ Danus Sara, Jonsson Stefan and Chakravorty Spivak Gayatri, *An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, *boundary 2* 2.20 (Summer 1993), p. 35. About the concept of strategic essentialism: Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Methuen, New York 1987, p. 205.

²⁶ See for example: *Tlostanova Madina, Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality*, „Journal of Postcolonial Writing”, 48 May 2, 2012, p. 120-142; Moore, D. C. *Is the Post-in Postcolonial the Post-in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*, PMLA, 116(1) 2001, p. 111-28, (online:) <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/p/postcolonial-post-soviet/is-the-post-in-postcolonial-the-post-in-post-soviet-toward-a-global-postcolonial-critique-david-chioni-moore.html>. Specifics of particularly Russian colonial experience as peripheral power was analyzed in (among others) works of Etkind and Morozov. See for example: Etkind Alexander, *Internal Colonization. Russia's Imperial Experience*, Polity Press, Cambridge & Malden 2011; Morozov Viatcheslav, *Russia's postcolonial identity: a subaltern empire in a Eurocentric world*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire 2015. On similar ground, Jan Sowa presented its interpretation of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a peripheral, local colonial empire in his book *Fantomowe ciało króla, an interpretation which (not surprise) awoke outrage*.

²⁷ Grabowska Mirosława, *Podział postkomunistyczny. Społeczne podstawy polityki w Polsce po 1989 roku*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2003; see also: Leszek Koczanowicz, *Post-postkomunizm a kulturowe wojny*, „Teksty Drugie”, 2010/5, p. 9-22

to be true Polish. Effectively, however in its most vulgar and direct form in the open, public discourse emerged just recently, it created not political, but in spirit: racial difference.²⁸ I'd stress that against (for example) Stanley's *nationalists/ethnic* interpretation, because while such patterns are present there, the created division is too deep and too fundamental.²⁹

But that turning the political clash into *identity* one, creates another set of problems with said identity. Namely: its reactive character, element raised by Kiossev, emphasised by its recent development. The local *singularity* as an *identity* has become, because of it, even more entangled in described dependencies.

It's maybe the most obvious if we look at the „Poland/Polish as a victim” narrative. The main problem there, which should not be hard to spot, is that such narrative effectively dismiss agency. The whole point of being a victim is to loose one's primary subjectivity as ability to maintain and exercise its agency. The trap there lays in this very point. While such tactics can be (for some extend) useful as defensive, dismissal or as a form of blackmail, and indeed, it's used in such fashion quite often, it also successfully defeats one of supposed goals of the whole „identity narrative” and its politics. By definitions, the victims has no voice, nor agency. Being a victim, and especially: a perpetual one as it's present in „Polish perpetual victimness” narrative, means: being effectively submitted and dependent. In other words: that very discourse puts the whole *identity* narrative in limbo. Moreover, uses of particular categories like „colonisation”, or „civilisation”, which as Kiossev pointed out in that very manner were constructed *elsewhere*, make any possible effort of any form of supposed liberation or de-victimisation futile.

It's peculiar especially with usage of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a power fantasy. That historical entity is used mainly as a relict, often quite surreal in fact, of former glory reinforcing the „perpetual victim” narrative. And actively preventing any effort for serious recognition of said power, which means also: taking responsibility for it's real historical power, failures, and long-term effects on the surroundings. Instead, the Commonwealth is one of the projections of glory, safely placed in the glorious, mystified past. What is worth mentioning, an interesting shift is present there. Self-recognition as a periphery of the West („Przedmurze”, *Antemurale*) is in this fantasy rebuilt as a centre of true European spirit and values (identified as Catholicism in

²⁸ While such narrative became prominent just recently, enhanced by Law&Order party last victory in elections, it was present in the background even before fall of the Soviet dominance, though mostly in the most radical, peripheral groups.

²⁹ The „post-communist” as internal enemy is, in this narrative, unable to be controlled, convinced, or converted, and even expulsion is not effective (because of its powerful external allies), instead, the extermination is the only answer. And in the symbolic field, such extermination in the form of delegitimation of the left politics and orientation as a whole, indeed, has happened. Recently that cleansing effort was strengthened by numerous legislatives directly aimed against selected groups of „post-communist” and those named as theirs local servants (like former members of police or military personnel) effectively making them second class citizens. With dwindling success the same method is actually used to silence or dismiss any opposition. This obviously is the same pattern as *the Jew* as hostile *alien species*, and in the nationalists discourse it has been obviously used for a long time; see for example analysis of Paweł Śpiewak in his book *Żydokomuna: interpretacje historyczne* (Śpiewak Paweł, *Żydokomuna: interpretacje historyczne*, Wydawnictwo Czerwone i Czarne, Warszawa 2012).

right-wing narrative). In this fantasy peripheral, local power (which for about three centuries Commonwealth, indeed, was) not only holds the „true Christian European self“ but also, thanks to clashes with numerous *barbarians* (Russians, Turks etc.), supposedly sharpens these ideals giving them theirs not only the most truthful, but also better, superior form. However, contrary to the narrative, the outcome is quite opposite. Placing the „spiritual European centre“ on the border, while maybe pleasant for peripheral narrator, does not actually makes it „central“, actually: the opposite happens. Treated as a „treasure“ said identity, in imagination sustained as „pure“, became even more marginal and peripheral. Putting its self-claimed wardens even deeper in the margin.

These two narratives connected with the „post-communists“ one shows how for example European Union’s Enlargement – objectively one of the most successful Polish (and also others Eastern-Center European countries like Hungary or Slovakia) endeavor for the last half of the century, has become gradually presented as dangerous encounter with the *Other*. Such rhetoric displaced a very popular previous one, which maybe naively puts that process in the „return to the Europe“ – namely: the center – narrative. One could argue that the placement of the Poland at the eastern border of the Union, at last for some extend, was one of the circumstances encouraging such mindset. And the position of the country on the actual border – therefore: in it’s historical place, could be one of these triggers. But while it could be, for some degree, useful point worth taking, for explanation of rising popularity of „being the great borderlands again“ narrative, even if one would take into account how orientalised as *Eastern Other* the Russia (for example) was long before, such statement is not very useful for explaining by itself, how the West (namely: the European Union) became the *Other*, too. Instead I’d argue that elements of that puzzle were already in place – and the „perpetual victim“ image as Commonwealth power fantasy are one of them – and right-wing writers and politicians just used them and turn things in motion. But while such reposition seems to be successful (at last for theirs benefit and for a time being) it also traps them deep in the peripheral area, effectively diminishing any significant agency and possibility to reach it.

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