

Teksty Drugie 2014, 1, s. 34-40  
Special Issue – English Edition



# **In the Shadow of Empires: Post-colonialism in Central and Eastern Europe – Why Not?**

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and attitudes, ways of thinking and of perceiving reality, influencing not only all aspects of daily life, but also morality. The imprint of subjugation has been stamped everywhere on the region and is hard to erase. But can it be described?

Claire Cavanagh, in her incisive and thought-provoking essay entitled "Postcolonial Poland: An Empty Space on the Map of Current Theory," points to the ideological hypocrisy of the analysts of postcolonialism who consistently ignore the imperial conquests of Russia, and later the Soviet Union. She correctly attributes the tendency to dwell exclusively on the cultural and economic imperialism practised by West European powers to the adherence, both tacit and overt, to the tenets of Marxism.

"In fact," as Cavanagh points out, "Poland, which for almost two hundred years was continuously dominated by the three neighboring powers and, at the beginning of the Second World War, was ruthlessly carved up by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, has earned the right to participate fully in the debate surrounding the issues related to post-colonial cultural dependency."

"In spite of these impressive post-colonial credentials, though," she adds, "only one European country has thus far been exempted from the binary 'First World-Third World' model now governing post-colonial studies. This is Ireland which is, as Seamus Deane remarks, 'the only Western European country that has both an early and a late colonial experience' (...) Deane is careful to distinguish here between East and West; still the Polish experience of colonization remains terra incognita in recent theory."<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to disagree. On the other hand, however, it seems that in order to break the conspiracy of silence concerning Russia's colonial practices one might also suggest that they be analyzed not only with respect to Poland, but also with reference to other nations that still remain in the grip of the former Soviet empire. Such an approach would certainly open up a fertile field of research, embracing both Russian and Soviet literature in the light of its openly expressed and hidden, imperial presuppositions. Ewa M. Thompson's book, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (2000), highlights the advantages of such treatment.<sup>4</sup>

But why not look at the problem of cultural dependency from the opposite angle and use post-colonial methodology to analyze the literature of East

3 C. Cavanagh, *Postkolonialna Polska. Biała plama na mapie współczesnej teorii*, „Teksty Drugie” 2003. 63-64. All quotations are from the Author's manuscript in English. Abbreviated version of this text: *Postcolonial Poland*, "Common Knowledge," Vol. 10, Issue 1 (Winter 2004), 82-92.

4 See: E. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2000.

European nations conquered by Russia or, after the Second World War, by the Soviet Union? Why not see it as testimony to both open and camouflaged colonial procedures? On the one hand, this literature reflects all manifestations of terror and ideological pressure as well as the efforts to impose another model of civilization – or rather of anti-civilization – that destroys the cultural heritage of those countries. On the other hand, it reveals and documents all possible games with the censorship apparatus, the purpose of which was to smuggle into the officially accepted literature values cherished by the occupied nations, values that represented and strengthened their feeling of national identity, and which were for this reason forbidden or merely tolerated in the state-directed [state-controlled] literature.

It is worth stressing that this kind of approach to national literature is gaining acceptance not only in Poland but also in other countries of the region, most of all in Ukraine. The collection of essays by Mykola Riabczuk entitled *From Little Russia to Ukraine* is a good example of where post-colonial methodology has been applied to the analysis of Russia's metropolitan practices in that author's country. The same approach may soon appear in the Baltic States and even in Belarus.<sup>5</sup>

Understood in this way, Polish literature could offer a valuable means of enriching information about the dynamics of cultural dependency. It provides if not a complete, then at least a clearly defined presentation of Russia's techniques of enforcing political and cultural supremacy, aimed not only at the Poles but also at every nationality inhabiting the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth both during the period of the partitions (1772-1918) and after World War II.

It should also be stressed that this region lay at the crossroads of three great powers and that, as a consequence, the territories of both the German and the Austro-Hungarian empires should be included in post-colonial studies, in the same way as the countries of Africa and South America. The dominance of German cultural models in Bohemia, Hungary, and the Balkan states, the friction between native elements and those that have been imposed, as well as the various forms of counteraction that led to the creation of new cultural forms – these issues have not been yet confronted, described, or analyzed. There is also the problem of the Ottoman Empire and its centuries-long hostile, oppressive presence in South-Eastern Europe. It is still visible, even menacing traces in Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania are undoubtedly worthy of closer examination. I would like to make it clear that it is not my intention to equate the colonization of both North and South American continents, Asia, and Australia with the sequence of wars and invasions that shaped

5 See: M. Riabczuk, *Od Małorosji do Ukrainy*, transl. O. Hniatuk, K. Kotyńska, Kraków 2002.

the political map of the continent of Europe. I only wish to emphasize here the uses of post-colonial methodology for the analysis of different kinds – and manifestations – of cultural dependency created by a dominant and menacing external culture.

To some extent post-colonialism can be compared with feminism in the sense that both methodologies, if applied judiciously, without an ideological bent, can be very useful in defining research problems clearly and in formulating entirely new questions.

To return to the Polish example: the thesis advanced by Clare Cavanagh seems most useful, even inspiring, but it portends a danger of replicating, albeit not vociferously, of the worn out and exhausted image of Poland as martyr, unjustly persecuted and always crushed under the invader's heavy boot. The image of ghastly suffering in a partially refashioned post-colonial garb is not very attractive to look at. So, how can it be counterbalanced? It seems to me that what is necessary is a total revision of perspective.

First of all, let us acknowledge the fact that in the course of Poland's history there were periods of Polish domination, rather than submission, particularly in those territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Until the end of the 19th century the supremacy of the Polish cultural pattern in the territories of today's Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine was regarded, as least by the Poles themselves, as self-evident, and suitable for the purpose of fostering a sense of a civilizing cultural mission. This attitude is amply documented by the Polish-language literature of these regions. In short, the question arises as to the role of this literature in both accurately reflecting and distorting the relationship between the dominant Polish culture and the mostly folkloric culture of nations under Poland's domination. Are the reciprocal cultural connections between Poland and other cultures presented truthfully, or do they simply reflect the Polish point of view? Were the distortions caused by lack of knowledge or by the conqueror's pride?

To obtain reliable answers to such questions it will be necessary to conduct detailed research, taking into consideration materials gathered by historians representing both sides of the question. Similar questions could legitimately be raised with regard to the literatures of other countries in the region which also experienced a transformation of the colonizing power into the victim of colonization and *vice versa*.

In other words, I would like to suggest applying a set of concepts for interpreting post-colonialism that would be free of ideology-generated exaggerations, of the tendency to perpetuate outdated attitudes, and the desire to indoctrinate the outcome. In one of my publications I have already postulated the need for a new approach to the issue of "Polish colonial discourse."

Let me add that future research on the literature of Eastern Europe would certainly profit from introducing the category of assimilation into the relationship between the culture of the conqueror and that of the conquered. The English-language literature of postcolonialism offers two very useful terms in this regard: “mimicry” and “mockery.”

It seems also that much clearer distinctions need to be made between such frequently applied terms as cultural syncretism and hybridity and that the concept of synergy, as interpreted by students of post-colonialism, should be introduced. As a result, the culture of multi-ethnic territories would be viewed as a function of many different factors, which in the process of interacting with one another lead to the creation of a new entity that turns out to be more than the sum of its components. This brings in the notion of transculturation, or a set of reciprocal forms of representation and cultural practice of both the colonies and the metropolis.

Mary Louise Pratt observes that the area of transculturation represents a social space where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath – as they are lived out across the globe today.”<sup>6</sup> Asymmetry is more important than any other aspect of this phenomenon, particularly in the context of an attractive but otherwise blurred and only superficially ideologically neutral image of a “borderland.” Of the utmost importance is also the need for critical autoreflexion in relation to the various prejudices, including those expressed through literature, regarding “strangers” and “outsiders,” as well as the various means by which “others” as well as “ourselves” are introduced and represented.

Let us return again to Clare Cavanagh’s essay. It opens with a quotation from Czesław Miłosz’s *The Captive Mind* where he reflects on diaries he had recently read which recorded the crimes committed by the Spanish conquistadors in North and South America.

Cavanagh’s comment reads as follows: “The revisionist take on the ‘triumph’ of Western civilization; the rage at the fate of native peoples extirpated by ‘knights fighting with faith and a sword’; the angry unmasking of the ostensibly Christian values that justified such atrocities: all seem remarkably timely today. Were it not for the language of the original citation, the passage might easily be taken from one of countless recent efforts to redress the strategic forgetfulness it laments by filling in the blank spots of the history of Western imperialism and examining its divisive legacy in modern post-colonial reality. Edward Said, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, Gaytri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Seamus Deane – these are merely a few of the most prominent critics

6 M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London 1992. 4.

to address in recent years the vexed relations between culture and empire in past and present alike.”<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to refrain here from quoting another, equally perspicacious passage, from *The Captive Mind*. In the chapter entitled “The Lessons of the Baltics,” Miłosz writes as follows: “The three sparsely settled countries underwent an intensive colonization, chiefly German and Polish, which marked the advance of Christianity. The result was that two different languages entered into use here: the masters, that is the landholders, spoke German (in Estonia and Latvia) and Polish (in Lithuania) in part because the local nobility adopted them. The common people, however, spoke their native tongue and preserved their cultural heritage from a legendary past.”<sup>8</sup>

What a striking similarity! But how could the Commonwealth be called an “empire?” And, first and foremost, is “colonization” an appropriate term in such context? Perhaps a “velvet” colonization would better reflect the truth, but such a version of the term could only be applied to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania since the Ukrainian territories witnessed much violence and bloodshed. One should also remember that *The Captive Mind* was addressed to a western audience for whom the countries and cultures east of the Iron Curtain were *ubi albae leones*. Thus the label “colonialism” was applied by Miłosz to the realities of that region simply for the sake of convenience, in an effort to make comprehensible, to an extent at least, a tense, complex, and multilingual area. But many so-called “true” Poles would wince at the very thought of being lumped together with the “colonizers,” and the German ones to boot.

Since his school days this “true” Pole has been taught to think that Polish culture was so enticing and the privileges enjoyed by the Polish nobility so worthy of emulation, that the Lithuanian and Ruthenian nobility were all eager to adopt the same standards. Nevertheless, such an idyllic image, long-cherished by the “true” Pole, cannot be sustained. With time, social divisions, interlaced with religious ones, caused severe clashes between various loyalties, which were made more intense by the fact that – until the 19th century at least – religious affiliation offered the only means of asserting identity, particularly among the lower classes. Such observations must be made and some precision in terms must be insisted upon, if post-colonial methodology is to be successfully applied to the so-called Second World, including the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The sequence: imperialism, colonialism, and cultural domination has been assumed, if only by implication, in the methodology of post-colonial studies

7 C. Cavanagh, 2003, 18-19.

8 Cz. Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, transl. by J. Zielonko, Penguin Books, London 1985. 225-226.

and is derived from the fundamental theses of Marxism. But the dating of colonialism as a phenomenon in the history of the world has been quite unstable. Some interpreters trace it only to ca. 1880, i.e. to the beginning of the demand for raw materials by industrialized countries, others go back much further – to the conquest of North and South America and to the establishment of missions and the beginning of the era of exploration in general.

This lack of consistency results, albeit indirectly, from the inclination of those who practice the current methods of post-colonial analysis to try to somehow revive the Europe-centered myth of uncontaminated primordiality, a vision of some authentic, pure culture. In this process fertile ground is created for mythmaking and ideological slants of all kinds. So, in the end, all criteria of distinction between the theory of conquest as such, which is at the root of almost all European states, and colonization.

Given these circumstances it seems necessary to break, as it were, the methodological chain and closely examine all its links. First of all, a new approach should be developed to such categories as imperialism and colonialism. Secondly, cultural domination should be analyzed with respect to those areas and periods in which it was not preceded by brutal conquest. Thirdly, the changing historical context in which all these phenomena took place should not be ignored.

It would be more helpful to abandon our enthusiasm for “sweeping narratives” and our faith in their ability to resolve all problems since they usually serve as a cover-up for some kind of coercion. Ignorance often serves to disguise arrogance while indifference conceals a sense of superiority. It seems that we would profit instead from “small-scale narratives,” from careful analysis and examination of different points of view and attitudes, and from seeing various positions as complementary and necessarily limited in their scope and usefulness.

One should also be skeptical of declarations containing expressions of good will towards “outsiders” as well as a desire to understand and accept as necessary and valid national, cultural, and religious divisions. Such common constructs as “half-breeds,” “half-brothers,” and “locals” are not, as is often suggested, expressions of respect for the complexity of multinational groupings, but serve as a device for camouflaging cultural bias and discrimination.

The refreshingly new image of one’s own national culture that may emerge from these purifying actions will be, without doubt, strikingly different from the one implanted in the consciousness of most people. Such a revision will probably provoke a spontaneous emotional rejection and may perhaps even hurt national pride, but let us hope that it will also be closer to the truth and liberate us, to some degree at last, from the lingering shadows of empire.

*Translation: Benajmin Koschalka*