

Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, eds. *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*. Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2014

The collective monograph represents a reassessment of the instruments and concepts used to define a space that has been neglected by Western and Third World postcolonial intelligentsia, the (post)communist Second World. In spite of this curious oversight, Central and Eastern European scholars have nevertheless appropriated and adapted the theoretical framework needed to produce a body of texts that analyze to what extent the two ‘post-’ spaces, the postcolonial and the postcommunist cohabit and converge, and that revise the methodology fit for the task. The much-debated topic of the communist ‘inheritance’ is engulfed by a more general discussion on the meandering evolution of the organisms of power in the postcommunist age, one in which the Russian imperialist spirit has recently been revived, spawned by an older belief in its messianic destiny. These subjects have inspired new and enticing approaches to the way in which the Central and Eastern European states view and acknowledge their traumatized (to the verge of schizophrenia) recent past.

The volume opens up with an open-ended question: “What post-colonial Europe?”, thus establishing the conceptual background against which we, as readers, must set the issues under scrutiny. The general outline of the discussion is disclosed and the constant recent preoccupation over a rather delicate matter is brought forth once more, namely the arguments supporting a comparative ‘reading’ of the postcolonial and postcommunist spaces that may inspire a merger of the theoretical corpuses that now seem to be separated by an academic iron curtain. The contributors to this book share the common basic idea of a need to bring the two ‘post-’s together, an idea that finds its expression in the words of the editors, Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, who quote, in their turn, Dorota Kolodziejczyk and Cristina Șandru’s reflections on the subject in the introduction to the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (special issue, 2012):

Post-communist [states] . . . and those previously colonized by West European powers, share a number of characteristics. These are, for example, structures of exclusion/inclusion (the centre/periphery model and theorizations of the liminal and ‘in-between’); formations of nationalism, structures of othering and representations of difference; forms and historical realizations of anti-colonial/anti-imperial struggle; the experience of trauma (involving issues of collective memory/amnesia and the rewriting of history); resistance as a complex of cultural practices; concepts such as alterity, ambivalence, selfcolonization, cultural geography, dislocation, minority and subaltern cultures, neocolonialism, orientalizing, transnationalism. (12)

Based on these first-hand observations, the necessity to produce a setting where both post-colonial and post-communist intellectuals would develop a common conceptual discourse represents a legitimate endeavor and the analyses depicted in the pages of this volume seem to run along these lines. The counter-argument to this type of discourse fades away in the background. Scholars have warned against the dangers of generalizations when talking about the communist *colonization* and the *colonies’* reaction to this process. Mladina Tlolstanova’s essay touches upon both the common aspects and

the points of departure between the postcolonial and postcommunist theoretical instruments. By citing other postcolonial and postcommunist authors (like Cristina Șandru), she mentions that the Second World scholars tend to universalize their approaches when developing a critical corpus that finds its origin within poststructuralist, post-Marxist and Anglophone discourse. The contextual paradigm of postcommunism can differ significantly between former USSR satellites and colonial subalterns and the specificity and nuances present in every post-communist region must not hide behind “universalist claims”. This plea can be backed up by strong arguments, thus turning the post-colonial/post-communist dichotomy into the focal point of a rather fervent debate. However, the present volume seems to react to such claims by successfully bringing together theories from various cultural spaces, uniting them under a common banner through the narrative of traumatic episodes and by highlighting the clefs produced at the level of collective consciousness.

Divided into five parts, the book first attempts to firmly root the post-colonial/post-communist dialectics within present-day cultural debate. The question in the title underlines the quintessential preoccupation of post-communist scholars: can we talk about two cultural outcomes of just one type of process of colonization? The paragraph cited above seems to provide an affirmative answer, asserting the reasons why a holistic or universalizing approach to the two ‘post-’ phenomena should represent the norm and providing enough evidence to support the argument of a homogenous pattern of experience undergone by the traumatized victims. The first chapter calls into question the solidity of the plea that invites scholars to develop a common conceptual framework for the discourse produced by the two ‘post-’ spaces. There have been voices that denounce the methodology and the notions employed by post-communist critics for having mimicked Western approaches without developing a specific paradigm in which to evolve on their own. The rest of the chapters, however, focus on developing a joint discourse that revolves around a few general notions and apply them to the concrete, specific and local manifestations of Soviet colonialism. In this way, all contributors participate in the critical effort to furnish the postcommunist conceptual vacuum with new signs, symbols and meanings.

The second chapter consists of articles that deal with the way in which narrative and history overlap in order to produce an accurate portrayal of the traumatized subjects. Bogdan Ștefănescu introduces the metaphor of “the void” as a rhetorical category that features in both postcommunist and postcolonial writing and is indicative of the literary topos of the Other’s “silence”. Romanian nationalist discourse before, during, and after communism is generated by the need to cope with a traumatizing experience, persistently represented as a cultural, social and historical void. The symbol of the “hole in the flag”, characterizing the Romanian revolution, represents a powerful icon meant to embody the “presence of an absence”. In the next essay, Adriana Răducanu calls forth a fresh perspective for reading the novels of Ismail Kadare. She borrows notions from various critical domains (postcolonialism, postcommunism, the Gothic novel) and creates a *mélange* that seems both enticing and coherent when applied to the rather opaque and paradoxical fiction of the Albanian author.

The third chapter in this collective volume touches upon the notion of displacement, cityscape and memory by looking at how the Soviet Union attempted to render former Western(ized) cities like Kaliningrad (the former Prussian city of Königsberg) and Budapest a *tabula rasa* in order to reinscribe them with new national and historical narratives. The inhabitants of these cities now carry with them the burden of a past “that has yet to be dealt with”, the equivalent of a historical gap that can be healed through painful acts of remembrance. The significance of rites is paramount to the creation of a communal identity claims Xénia Gáal who cites A. Assmann on collective memory:

Social groups ‘create’ memory for themselves ‘with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments’, and this memory is an essential element in the construction of identity. Thereby ‘collective memory is necessarily a mediated memory’. (247)

However, both Gáal and Assmann deem this perspective too vague and invite us to employ more specific notions like “family memory, social, political, national, and cultural memory” (248).

The next chapter deals with the way in which the dominant socialist discourses from various cultural spaces in Central and Eastern Europe depicted and re-produced the Orient by using the same stereotypes employed by the Western colonial centers. Slovak, Czech and Polish travel writing is carefully dissected in order to observe the familiar (and all too Western) discursive mechanisms of colonial power are employed to sketch the portrait of the radical Other of the Third World and to create a national identity that directly opposition these Orientalist stereotypes.

The final chapter ponders over the ambiguous and problematic notion of a national unified self in regions which seem to be stuck between two types of discourse. The current Ukrainian predicament gave rise to actions that represent the by-product of the clash between various identities, nationalisms and interests “which inhere in different models of cultural development: postcolonial, anti-colonial, and neo-colonial” (337). The essays in this final section discuss the degree in which the notions related to the paradigm of the “Orient” theorized by Said still apply to certain Western discursive remnants that produce stereotypical representations of the (European) East.

Discovering the thread that binds these apparently disparate essays may not be an easy task. It calls for an objective distancing in order to see the bigger picture, the drawing in the carpet, and thus reveal the new postcolonial paradigm in which the traumatized Central and East European postcommunist cultures need to be viewed. The metonymic approaches called on to characterize a rather heterogeneous space do share a number of common categories—trauma, memory, (self-) identity—that characterize the ‘post-’ chronotope. And the “glocal” nature of the collection of essays in Pucherova and Gafrik’s volume may be viewed as an answer to those who have criticized the postcommunist approaches for their tendency to sacrifice locality for universality.

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