

Postcommunism: An Other Postcolonialism?

In spite of Derrida's timely *Specters of Marx* and of the critical activity that it generated, as well as Stéphane Courtois's *The Black Book of Communism*, whose responses varied from highly enthusiastic support to bitter criticism, out of all post's, post(-)communism¹ as such has not received the theoretical attention it should have otherwise deserved. The editors of the present issue attempt to fill this gap, by proposing a rapprochement between post(-)communism and post(-)colonialism, yet not without expressing some doubts and reflections as to the legitimacy of this parallel, which must be called into question in the following pages.

There are several indisputable resemblances between the period initiated by the dramatic events of 1989 in Eastern Europe and the age inaugurated in several developing countries when they conquered their independence. *Mutatis mutandis*, at least a part of Achille Mbembe's diagnostic, referring to the situation of post-colonial Africa, can be used for the description of the status of countries in the former "communist bloc":²

Cinq tendances lourdes circonscrivent l'avenir, parant l'horizon immédiat d'une clôture orageuse. La première est l'absence d'une pensée de la démocratie qui servirait de base à une véritable alternative au modèle prédateur en vigueur à peu près partout. La deuxième est le recul de toute perspective de révolution sociale radicale sur le continent. La troisième est la sénilité croissante des pouvoirs nègres. [...] La quatrième est l'enkystement de pans entiers de la société et l'irrépressible désir, chez des centaines de millions de personnes, de vivre partout ailleurs dans le monde plutôt que chez eux – volonté générale de fuite, de défection et de désertion ; rejet de la vie sédentaire faute de pouvoir dire la résidence ou le repos. À ces dynamiques structurelles s'en ajoute une autre : l'institutionnalisation des pratiques de racket et de la prédation, des spasmes brusques, des émeutes sans lendemain qui, à l'occasion, tournent facilement à la guerre de pillage.³

Being more than passing coincidences, identifiable resemblances (starting with the lack of 'democratic thinking') may be the result of a similarity between founding

¹ The oscillation between a hyphenated and a non-hyphenated variant indicates the fact that the authors of the present issue seek to point simultaneously towards two common, articulated, yet divergent senses of the word. Used with a hyphen, 'post-communism' designates the period of political and economic transition in Eastern Europe, after the 1989 events, in the same way as 'post-colonial studies' refer to a series of historical, economic, sociological, geopolitical (etc.) studies which endeavour to describe and analyse the state of countries after they have rid themselves of their colonisers. Written in one word, 'postcommunism', like 'postcolonialism', claims to orient towards an anthropological and philosophical approach of the irreversible change brought about in individuals and nations by the founding event (colonisation and the institution of 'popular democracies', respectively).

² In this Introduction, communism designates the historical period delimited by the 1917 revolution and Gorbachev's fall in 1991, during which a political doctrine bearing the same name, based on Marxist philosophy, represented the general framework within which power was exercised in the Soviet Union as well as in different East-European countries. This is an operational definition, fully aware of its (historical, geographical, political, etc.) limits, whose purpose is merely to establish a common ground with the reader concerning a key concept for the problematic of the present thematic issue.

³ Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit. Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2010), 21.

phenomena. Several intellectuals go as far as to compare communism to a form of colonialism,⁴ without showing precisely how the same causes lead to the same effects. Fraught with less risk is the attempt to connect the two phenomena on the basis of their similar recourse to violence, without which they could not have been implemented as political projects. Communism, like colonialism, represented a non-indigenous rupture of paths of development for numerous countries. If, as in colonised countries, the first reflex at the moment of the collapse has been to nurse the illusion of ‘tying the broken thread’, the reality of the irreversible character of the changes that communism had wrought imposed itself rapidly in the East, as was also swiftly perceived in the former colonies. Once the ‘return to oneself’ was deemed impossible and even not desirable, the problem of what direction to take and what objective to construct became apparent in both spheres, a few decades afterwards. In the East as well in the South – convenient geographical designations which elude a series of definitions – the ‘post’ periods can be likened insofar as they lead from interrogation and political aspiration (changes in governance) to the perception of societal issues and characteristics (for which Mbembe’s quotation is significant), thus opening up a whole series of questions connected to the (re)defining of the self. At this point, post-colonial or post-communist studies, as the analysis of ‘after’ trajectories, are no longer sufficient, and a new perspective, the one of post’s without hyphen, must enter the scene.

However, at the risk of turning away potential readers from the very outset, the editors of this issue cannot help wondering whether an academic journal from the East, addressing a group of predominantly East-European authors by dint of its sheer situation (no matter how extended its space might be, thanks to the internet), is the most appropriate medium for asking the question of postcommunism, in the forms and with the echoes which its proximity with postcolonialism associates this term in the title of this thematic issue.

Inaugurated in the eighties, especially in the United States, postcolonial studies are characterised by distinctive features, anchored in a solid ideological framework that has enabled them to differentiate themselves from the historical or geopolitical readings of the period following the accession to independence in “the Third World” or in “Southern” countries. Postcolonialism asserted itself as different from post-colonialism, both as regards its object as much as – or especially – the conceptual apparatus called upon to explore it. Indeed, postcolonialism is devoted to a global reading of the contemporary world, to a reflection on its tendencies, working from the premise that the trauma of colonization and its aftermaths are fundamental phenomena – we could even say: *the* basic phenomena – that mould and shape today’s humanity from within. Postcolonialism can be defined as a deconstruction of a cultural model based on a representation of the world divided into a centre and peripheries of culture and civilization, a critique of a binary opposition that splits humanity into ‘us’ and ‘the

⁴ “One of the most outstanding researchers into postcolonialism writes that in the case of Tsarist Russia, despite the fact that its tactics depended on a gradual acquisition of neighbouring territories and not on the conquest of overseas territories, we are still dealing with evident imperialism. [...] Why should this way of thinking be appropriate when talking about Tsarist Russia and not appropriate when applied to the imperialist procedures of the Soviet Union (or Russia today), whose expansion was/is governed by similar mechanisms? Also, another important question arises when discussing this: why are nations and minorities fighting for sovereignty within the framework of today's Russian Federation completely ignored by the postcolonialists?” (Janusz Korek, ‘Central and Eastern Europe from a Postcolonial Perspective,’ *Postcolonial Europe*, <http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/index.php/en/essays/60--central-and-eastern-europe-from-a-postcolonial-perspective>)

others', the former being endowed with an incontestable and virtually universal political, social, economic system, while the latter are perceived as a backward, underdeveloped, powerless and limited species. As postcolonial studies show, such a vision has not been conveyed only by the colonizing countries, even if it is, beyond any doubt, tightly connected to the ideological developments which have presided over the wars of conquest of the East;⁵ the whole Eurocentric culture, convinced of its superiority and especially of its purity, advocates colonialism as a process meant to civilise and to reduce the difference between 'us' and 'the others' through the imposition of a unique model "that formulates the promise of a universal emancipation, while excluding the colonized in order to actually assert the primacy of racial difference".⁶

Therefore postcolonialism presupposes as fundamental premise the existence of a visible 'cultural identity', with dominant claims, against which it intends to struggle. The historical phenomenon of colonialism appears as a result of the will to export / impose this identity as a universal garb, including to populations that are declared unworthy of wearing it. Such a perspective allows us to understand why, for postcolonial studies, the colonial scandal is far from being over once independence has been conquered, and, even less, once memorial political gestures of repentance⁷ have been made, which are discredited by the concomitant reaffirmation of ambitions to export and impose a model in the name of which colonial plunder took place. From a conceptual standpoint, postcolonialism avails itself of the critique of authority and pays unflagging attention to "who says I / who is I".

Thus, to understand postcommunism as a postcolonialism of sorts presupposes harnessing a similar conceptual apparatus in order to interpret communism and its reverberations. Such an ambition is, no doubt, legitimised by the importance of the communist phenomenon, which, in translating into history a philosophy of rupture and alternative, represents one of the three fundamental traumas of the 20th century from which the world of today was born.⁸ The alignment with colonialism is necessary to communism, not only to identify essential similarities and convergences (although these seem possible, as suggested by several essays in this issue), but in order to promote this phenomenon, which was paradoxically silenced or somehow downplayed by current studies. The degree of penetration in consciences and public opinion in the West⁹ is incomparably higher in relation to issues tackled by postcolonial studies and to the reading/commemoration of the Shoah than that of understanding and putting into perspective the communist phenomenon as a major event of the 20th century and of world history. The rapprochement between postcommunism and postcolonialism can be

⁵ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁶ "Introduction", *Ruptures postcoloniales. Les nouveaux visages de la société française*. Sous la direction de Nicolas Bancel, Florence Bernault, Pascal Blanchard, Ahmed Boubeker, Achille Mbembe, Françoise Vergès, (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2010), 18, our translation.

⁷ For instance, the apologies to Libya, a former colony of Italy between 1911 and 1943, presented by the Italian prime minister Berlusconi in 2008.

⁸ The authors of these lines designate as the "three historical events" that brought a world order to an end, thus forcing Europe to reinvent and redefine itself: communism, the Nazi concentration death camps and colonial independence.

⁹ In the sense this term had during the Cold War, with all the reproaches concerning its conceptual weakness that can be brought to it.

nothing but beneficial to the visibility of the former, a result which makes up for the risk of misunderstanding or even indignation / revolt at this intellectual parallel.¹⁰

On the other hand, as shown above, postcolonialism “operates” only insofar as it constitutes itself as a critique of one dominant cultural phenomenon, at once calling for and authorising the postmodernist / deconstructionist apparatus that characterises it, as its only conceptual framework. Using a Freudian metaphor, postcolonialism could be said to need a “father figure” in order to undermine it. However, was such a strong and impressive entity created in the communist period? Was there ever a ‘cultural identity with hegemonic claims’, an authentic, exportable and persistent ‘communist culture’ to represent an idol to topple over in order to free the modern world? Nothing is certain anymore.

No doubt, communism (this time, in its philosophical sense) has represented and still represents an ideal for thousands of people. Numerous slogans fashioned by it continue to exercise an almost indescribable fascination: “classless society”, “abolition of private property”, “bright future”... However, it is enough to confront these watchword-ideals with the ideas in the name of which the Western conquests have been led (“increased material civilisation”, “escape from barbarity”, “access to culture, lawfulness and administration”) to see the fundamental difference between the two constructions, identifiable at the level of their consistency and that of the support they enlisted. Thus, while Western proposals are concrete, based on real (if doubtless debatable and criticisable) experiences, the communist alternative seduces only as an unfulfilled and, accordingly, fantasy-inducing potentiality, and not one conducive to description: “the classless society”, as it existed in East-European countries, has neither been a political objective, nor a source of inspiration for anybody. At the same time, it is known that the colonisers’ success was related to their ability to generate genuine support from the different categories of actors that it mobilised (highest-ranking politicians, commanders-in-chief, colonists of humble origin, soldiers, representatives of the colonized, etc.). Likewise, beyond the cynical desire to get rich and dominate, colonialism has existed and held its ground thanks to the trust that its ideological apparatus fostered and the genuine support that it secured from at least a part of its actors. Now one can only wonder whether real communism truly benefited from such a genuine and prolonged support in Russia or in the East. If we are to believe Solzhenitsyn, the period in which Eastern nations took to the streets, sincerely chanting slogans, can be counted in months, perhaps even in weeks. In *The First Circle*, one of the characters asserts that only between February and October can one talk of real revolutionary enthusiasm in Russia,¹¹ while in *The Red Wheel* the narrator seems to

¹⁰ Misunderstandings and indignation that can be anticipated from the experience of bringing together communism and Nazism: when Stéphane Courtois proposed this parallel, he was highly criticised by researchers working on Nazism, who reproached him for his ‘attack’ on the fundamental uniqueness of the Shoah, as well as by scholars on communism, who considered that a rapprochement between the two systems criminalises without reason a system who tried to propose an alternative to capitalism. The parallel being less easy as far as the political systems of communism and postcolonialism, respectively, are concerned, it is to be expected that to these intellectual and emotional reactions, a certain perplexity should be added in the case of the present convergence communism/colonialism as well as their respective ‘post’s’: i.e. what would be the point of creating such a conceptual pairing? Although his article in the present volume is written from an exploratory perspective, it is to Abdoulaye Imorou’s credit that he launches the discussion about the virtues of such a convergence.

¹¹The protagonist pays a clandestine visit to his uncle from Tver. This one remembers that, on January 5, 1918, a demonstration is drowned in blood by the Bolshevik militia: “We marched grimly, in silence, not singing. We understood the importance of the occasion — but perhaps we didn’t fully understand. This

conclude that the fate of the ‘revolution’ was already sealed from the very first days of the Petersburg uprisings.¹² In both cases, «le cœur n’y est plus», very quickly, even if generations of children will be subsequently perverted by the unique way of thinking, and asked to turn in their parents for its sake, etc. Sending all representatives with revolutionary aspirations (constitutional democrats [KD], socialist-revolutionaries [SR], Mensheviks, etc.) to the gulag, locking up the former underground activists, is significant for the premature divorce of the communist leaders, with Lenin and Stalin in front, from the ideals and cultural models in whose names they had gained power. In communist societies, it is no secret that the elites believe in one thing and do something else than what they preach, and that their social and cultural project – whenever this existed apart from the simple desire for power and satiation – articulate around other lines of force than those that constitute the official discourse.¹³

In the East, the early schizophrenia of the population, owing to the swift perception of the limits of the imposed model,¹⁴ thus contributed fundamentally to undermining its hegemonic tropism; the collapse of the Soviet Union – whose doctrinarian supremacy had already been contested by China, North Korea, Cuba, or even Albania, long before the 1989 revolutions – gave the death blow to any claims to supremacy from the communist cultural model. Thus, at the moment of the 1989 revolutions, the majority of the society from the former communist bloc was not ideologically dominated by the communist cultural model, which had been amply contested and anathematised – whether in a whisper or in fear – before the collapse of those regimes. This does not mean that a series of other healings¹⁵ was not necessary, or that exorcising communism through speech was over, as can be seen in different texts from this issue (see Marina Rotaru’s and Dana Bădulescu’s articles), where the tendency to tell a repressed truth can be clearly read between the lines. From this point of view, the articles gathered here contribute more to post-communist (i.e. with a hyphen) studies, whose necessity and legitimacy are in no small measure nevertheless contested through the choice of a ‘postcultural studies’ perspective previously mentioned.

was the one and only day of a free Russian parliament, something that had not existed in the preceding five hundred years and would not exist in the one hundred years ahead” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. *In the First Circle*. trans. Harry T. Willets. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009, 454).

¹² Commenting on the reasons why Solzhenitsyn progressively gave up his grandiose project of *The Wheel* (projected over twenty historical “knots”, out of which only four were written, for a volume of over 5,500 pages), Georges Nivat notes: « Il déclare donc dans plusieurs textes qu’il découvre, au contact du matériau historique, et en particulier en lisant la presse, à quel point tout est joué dès février, en somme les bolcheviks sont presque exonérés de la faute d’avoir abattu l’arbre russe ; ce sont les bourgeois, les ‘Cadets’ notamment, et aussi les socialistes, en particulier le bavard Kerenski, cabotin épris de son rôle, qui ont substitué au langage de la vérité celui du bavardage sans fin, idéologisé... » (Georges Nivat, « La roue de l’histoire : Alexandre Soljénitsyne », *Le débat*, Gallimard, 165 (mai-août 2011): 192).

¹³ This ‘alternative cultural project’ would be to set up an ‘Asian model’ of organization of forces of production and social relations, combining total individual alienation in favour of society with absolute despotism. The ‘Asian model’ raises many issues, from the relevance of its denomination to questioning whether it represents a perversion of Marxist thought or its result. Importantly for these lines of introduction, this model should not appear to be imposed in any way as a hegemonic framework, thus justifying a ‘post’ deconstruction.

¹⁴ A swift perception doubtless connected to the fundamental inefficiency of indoctrination methods that can brainwash and alienate individuals in a politically correct discourse, yet which are not able to foster true adhesion.

¹⁵ A ‘cultural mode’ was set up in Eastern European countries, based on what Ioan Sîrbu calls ‘knavishness’, yet this one never claimed to be an ideal model to be exported worldwide as a unique one.

The persistence of the communist illusion, as François Furet would say, lasts much longer in Western societies, which were spared the hard school of real communism. Communism as a political aspiration, and Marxism as supreme philosophy, are fundamental intellectual coordinates for a whole section of Western intelligentsia. Moreover, these elites' behaviour is often comparable to colonising messianism, pertaining to the same universalising phantasm (a world in which thought in its entirety will be communist), and creating the same situation of paradoxical binary in which certain like-minded individuals (for instance the Anglo-Saxon liberals) must be both converted to and excluded from, because unworthy of, communion with the Supreme Truth. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Derridean deconstruction was levelled – in *Spectres of Marx* and especially in *Marx and Sons* – not only at a liberalism triumphant over the opponent's disappearance, but also at those Marxist orthodoxies characterised by the aspiration to become unsurpassable “unique thoughts”.

From this point of view developed up to now, there is thus a risk that postcommunist studies, thought through the model of postcolonial studies, may lose their legitimacy outside Western societies and evolutions, where a visible, or even dominant cultural model and a ‘communist’ identity were built and genuinely attracted entire groups of individuals as a mode of thought and of representation.¹⁶ A postcommunism having as its object of study – as is the case in the present essays – especially books and discourses from the East seems not to be conceivable but under the auspices of an alterity which is quite radically different from postcolonialism. As can be observed when reading these essays, postcommunism would be much more, a “postcolonialism otherwise” (for whose understanding Malraux's idea of “metamorphosis” should be harnessed), rather than ‘an other postcolonialism’.

This, however, does not exclude certain significant similarities. As we can read, more explicitly or between the lines, in several articles (see the articles written by Anna Horolets and Olga Kozłowska, Kalina Maleska and Vladislava Gordić Petković), the postcommunist East confronts itself in fact with the same domination of a Eurocentric (‘Western’) model, against which voices and societies of the former colonies rise. Overturning communist regimes (also) led to the setting up of the Coca Cola kingdom, whose enthronement has created from the beginning as much intellectual irritation as material satisfaction among Eastern nations. Therefore, to a certain extent, the postcommunist situation can be understood as a neo-colonialism, which similarly leads to the necessity to challenge the supremacy of West-European culture, with all its North-American contributions and inflections.

Within what could be called a ‘post post-colonialism’, Eastern countries meet Southern countries and the worldwide intellectual community (as can be also seen in Manuela Cazan's article) in an effort to deconstruct a unique culture and create cultural hybridity. From this perspective, it does not require a distinctive conceptual apparatus, and can be perceived as a category of postcolonial studies, or a branch such as “subaltern studies.”

¹⁶ Once more, this assertion should in no way be understood as a negation of any adhesion to ‘the communist model’ in Eastern countries. There were ‘sincere communists’, meaning individuals who felt under no compulsion to define themselves with concepts from the communist phraseology in the East and in the West, even though their number is infinitely smaller than what the Party wanted to claim. There were genuine communist revolutionaries, no matter how questionable their motivations might be in a certain intellectual discourse, who seek to wash the nations in the East of any guilt with regard to what happened to them.

And, yet, just as in the case of postcolonialism, the discourse of postcommunism is dialogic and hybridised. Competing vocabularies and ideologies contaminate, dislocate and complement one another (see the articles by Anthony Gardner, Răzvan Săftoiu and Carmen Popescu, Jolan Bogdan, Anca Dobrinescu, Bogdan Ștefănescu). Perhaps the multiplicity of coexisting voices is the only sanitary alternative to both colonial and communist hegemonies. To allow the refreshing plurality of languages to be heard, these introductory words would have to be spoken from another('s) perspective.

This would mean that while it may appear that postcommunism is appropriating the same critical apparatus of postcolonialism, the transposition to a new context generates a different discourse altogether. Reiteration always comes with a twist. From Heraclitus to Borges, we have been warned that you can never step in the same river twice. Nothing is ever the same the second time around. Especially when instead of flowing with the ideological tide, you want to swim upstream. Postcommunism turns the postcolonialist merit ribbon into a Moebius strip. Hence the vexation. Marxism is a liberating and emancipatory discourse in the capitalist West where it is meant to curve and counterbalance the triumphalism of the liberal hegemony. In the Moebius twist of history, Marxism turns up in the communist East as the very medium of totalitarian domination. In this context, the liberal discourse plays the part of the hero who will deliver individuals from the chains of collectivism.

Like Edwin Morgan's "The First Men on Mercury", postcommunist critics are appropriating the language of the menacing Other (the dreaded Marxist ideology) to run an autopsy of the communist East with the very conceptual instruments that Marxism has devised in order to deal with power and ideology in the capitalist West. It has long been the turn of postcolonialist critics to reconsider the course of their journey to happy egalitarian shores by learning from the experience of Soviet colonialism and of Marxist-Leninist missionaryism, Kalashnikov in hand.

In that sense, postcommunism is an unflattering mirror for radical discourse and rather than being a subdivision of postcolonialism, they are both different branches of the study of cultural identity and discourse, alongside feminism, ethnocriticism, or gay and lesbian studies, all professing to emancipate their marginalized communities by exposing the way in which the hegemonic discourse and cultural institutions of power colonize subordinate groups. But postcommunism comes with an important difference. All the leftist discourses of liberation could learn from the fable of Soviet colonization of both lands and minds that reversing the direction of missionaryism does not deliver anyone from the danger of oppressive intolerance.

Is there genuine postcommunism in the post-Soviet world or is the Marxist community of Western intellectuals experiencing the only true form of postcommunism? Here, postcommunism is once more a mirror image of the discourse of Marxist critics in the West. In Western intellectual circles, Marxism is programmatically articulated and explicitly professed in critical discourse, yet tacitly all these intellectuals continue to enjoy the social and financial benefits of capitalist democracy. In post-Sovietized cultures, Marxism has almost entirely been driven out of the public discourse which is now dominated by liberal pro-capitalist projects and values. However, half a century of communism could not have left the mentalities unscathed. It has sunk in the obscure and unavailable areas of spontaneous thought and civic reflexes from where it sends out fragments of robotic messages of egalitarianism

and intolerance. The phantom of the lost Stalinist Father still haunts the postcommunist unconscious and makes the post-Soviet subject both desire and revile its surrogate successors.

The “Miscellaneous” section gathers two essays which, though not specifically addressing the thematic focus of the volume, will provide examples of Europeanization processes in film-making (Chantal Cornut-Gentile D’Arcy’s analysis of Klapisch’s 2002 *L’Auberge espagnole*) and a constructive dialogue between philosophy and literature in the analysis of Benjamin’s key phrase “dialectics at a standstill”, applied to Kundera’s fiction (Constance Goh).

The “Reviews” section, featuring three full-length review articles (Anamaria Schwab, Arleen Ionescu and Laurent Milesi, Ioana Galleron), proposes three books whose overarching thematic is to articulate the relationship between communism and postcommunism: Alexandru Matei’s *Mormântul comunismului românesc*. [The Grave of Romanian Communism], Patrick McGuinness’s *The Last Hundred Days* and Stéphane Courtois’s *Sortir du communisme, changer d’époque. Après la chute du Mur*.

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