

Reluctant Siblings: Methodological Musings on the Complicated Relationship between Postcolonialism and Postcommunism¹

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Abstract

The coloniality of former Soviet republics and satellites presents critics with both ideological and epistemic embarrassment and it has generally been met with reserve in academic circles. Though Soviet colonial imperialism has been amply documented, scholarly overviews of colonialism as a general subject blatantly disregard it, yielding a distorted, Westcentric picture of colonialism as a theoretical category. This article sheds light on the possible causes for this reticence and proposes methodological clarifications regarding the ambiguity of the term colonialism and the complications that arise from the problematic position of East European communism.

Keywords: *postcommunism, Soviet colonialism, semicolonialism, East European identity, definition of colonialism, anamorphosis*

The coloniality of former Soviet republics and satellites has generally been met with reserve in academic circles. Only a handful of Western researchers have pleaded for treating communist countries as colonized cultures and even fewer have actually done so in applied, analytical texts. Almost none of them work in postcolonial studies². Scholars from the former Soviet bloc have been equally reticent to accept their (post)colonial status with notable exceptions, especially from Poland and the Baltic states.

The notion of comparing colonialism and communism has generally been met with silent reluctance and occasionally with flat dismissals. The silence means that scholars of postcolonialism and postcommunist fail to acknowledge the relevance of each other's methods and fields of study³. Though one may do no more than speculate about the reasons for silence, some critics have ventured into that insecure territory. In

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² The list includes historians like Jürgen Osterhammel (1997), political scientists like Leslie Holmes (1997), Henry Carey and Rafal Raciborski (2004), anthropologists like Katherine Verdery (2002), geographers like Sharad Chari (K. Verdery & Sharad Chari 2009) and Alison Stenning (2005), Slavic scholars like Ewa M. Thompson (2000) and Clare Cavanagh (2004). David Chioni Moore (2001) is an Africanist and very likely the only exception in this list.

³ Described by Moore (2001), Verdery (2002), and Chari & Verdery (2009).

most such accounts, the culprit is Marxism. David Chioni Moore proposes that postcolonial critics are unable to detach themselves from the familiar representations of three-worlds theories and from their Marxist agendas which make the Western/First World the villain and sole cause of all evil, the Third World its exclusive victim, and the socialist Second World the redeeming alternative⁴. Kārlis Račevskis finds that the relationship between the Western left and communist colonialism is one of denial and complicity: “according to the Western critical canon, it is not possible to be both a victim of Marxism *and* colonialism, since Marxism has always belonged to the tradition of anti-colonial discourse.”⁵ Yet another criticism directed against the inadequacy of leftist hermeneutics talks of a nostalgic Marxism that has contaminated postcolonial studies,⁶ making it difficult for radical critics to justify the “disjuncture between the context of Fanon’s work, in the midst of a revolutionary war, and the quiet campuses from which the post-colonial has emerged.”⁷

Even supporters of Marxism, like Chari and Verdery, who otherwise share Moore’s belief that three-world theories need to be revised⁸, admit that the connection between postcommunism and postcolonialism needs to be made from within a “refined” Marxist perspective, though they hasten to add that the adjustment should be performed “possibly with an eye to new socialist futures”⁹. Predictably, Chari and Verdery chose to ignore Moore’s article.

One can easily suspect bad faith in the failure to recognize the USSR as a colonial empire. Despite the rather numerous books that document Soviet colonial imperialism, scholarly overviews of colonialism as a general subject blatantly disregard Soviet colonization and imperialism. Occasionally, the problem is duly acknowledged but not pursued, as with Jürgen Osterhammel:

Concepts of colonialism and decolonization might further our understanding of multicultural Soviet Union and neighboring satellite nations that were under its military control. This area has not been addressed in sufficient detail and goes beyond the scope of the present study; it presents great challenges to theories of comparative colonialism and imperialism.¹⁰

⁴ David Chioni Moore, “Is the ‘Post-’ in Post-colonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 116, 1 (2001): 117.

⁵ Kārlis Račevskis, “Toward a Postcolonial Perspective on the Baltic States,” in *Baltic Postcolonialism*, ed. by Violeta Kelertas (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 171.

⁶ “In a post-socialist era, what can the left believe in? The obvious answer is the past.” Alastair Bonnet, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (London: Continuum, 2010), 96.

⁷ Bonnet, *Left in the Past*, 98. On the same page Hélène Gill is quoted calling it “a romance, the self-indulgent nostalgia of late modernity, to read Fanon as if we were about to join him in the trenches of the anti-colonial national liberation struggles.”

⁸ Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no.1 (2009): 12 and passim.

⁹ Chari and Verdery, 24.

¹⁰ Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers and Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1997 [1995]), 118.

The case of Melvin E. Page's encyclopedia of colonialism¹¹ is, perhaps, revealing for what can only be a case of scholarly bad faith. Not only is the article for the British Empire five pages long whereas the entry for the Soviet Union is barely one page, but in the third volume, which consists of a collection of documents, the chapter on Soviet colonialism is entirely missing although the authors dedicate as many as 80 pages to documents relating to the British Empire and even some 30 pages to something called the "U.S. Empire"!

It is rather difficult to resist the conclusion that traditional historiography is written under the spell of West-centric ideology and it consequently fails to acknowledge a similar status to its ideological and political rival. Radical anti-capitalist pronouncements seem equally biased in refusing to admit that Marxist-Leninist states were able to display the very oppressive behaviour they pretended to oppose. Though clashing, these two ideological agendas both fail to register the USSR as a colonial empire, the consequence of which is that none of its subordinated cultures are recognized as victims of forced colonization.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that minorities from former communist countries carry insufficient political weight in the academia and extramurally to exert the pressure needed to change common mentalities and academic focus, especially when compared to other marginalized groups such as non-Caucasians, females, the youth, the lower classes or homosexual communities. Hence, the postcommunist agenda is politically, socially, and economically not relevant enough to generate epistemic changes¹². Though unrevised Marxism is seen by many as the cause for the methodological lag in postcolonial studies, other critics have invoked alternative reasons for this theoretical resistance. Rodica Mihăilă proposes that post-communism is an awkward topic because it fails to concentrate on race and to "confirm the thesis of growing instability and rapid "decline of national identities", which underlies American Studies models of transnationalism."¹³

Though there are occasional candid accounts of more mundane motives¹⁴, most critical accounts warrant the hypothesis that the reluctance to broach the comparison between postcommunism and postcolonialism comes from an *ideological* embarrassment on both sides. Moore explains the silence on the part of postcommunism

¹¹ Melvin E. Page, *Colonialism: An International Social, Cultural, and Political Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003).

¹² Bogdan Ștefănescu, "On the Inconvenience of Being Born A Romanian, Or A Third Discourse from The Second World: Post-Communist Dilemmas in the Age of Post-Imperialist Emancipation", in *Transatlantic Dialogues: Eastern Europe, The US and Post-Cold War Cultural Spaces*, ed. by Rodica Mihăilă and Roxana Oltean, (București: Editura Universității din București, 2009), 37-9.

¹³ Rodica Mihăilă, "Atypical Postcolonial Spaces: American Studies and the Postcommunist Context," *Euresis* 1 (2005): 137-8.

¹⁴ In fact, postcommunism may be seen as an undesired competitor in a scramble for *Lebensraum* that is already rather fierce. Here is Aparajita Sagar meditating on the impediments of a dialog between related postcolonial fields of study: "The concept of diaspora has emphasized the need for postcolonial studies to enter a sustained dialogue with Afro-American or native American studies, again without presupposing an entire coincidence or a complete discontinuity of interests. Unfortunately, however, such efforts have often been thwarted in the academy by the phenomenon of various marginalized studies being made to compete for resources." [Aparajita Sagar, "Postcolonial Studies," in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. by Michael Payne (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 426.]

scholars by the racial and religious divide between “European” cultures in the post-Soviet region and the non-European postcolonials and, interestingly, by the area’s very postcoloniality which triggers autochthonism as a compensatory behavior and compels the post-Soviet postcommunist subject to mimic the new Western dominating cultural form¹⁵.

How does one account for this reluctance being mirrored by scholars from the former Soviet bloc? Moore explains the silence on the part of postcommunism scholars through the racial and religious divide between “European” cultures in the post-Soviet region and the non-European postcolonials and, interestingly, by the area’s very postcoloniality which triggers autochthonism as a compensatory behaviour and compels the post-Soviet postcommunist subject to mimic the new Western dominating cultural form¹⁶. Radu Surdulescu suggests psychological reasons for the embarrassment of Romanian intellectuals when confronting post-communism as part of the *post-* age and highlights their schizophrenic vacillation between radical anti-foundationalism and pre- and anti-communist liberal commitments:

Yet, probably the most violent change that the postmodern thought put to the new culture which was emerging from under the large veil of the totalitarian society was the radical, anti-foundational questioning of truth and logocentrism, in the wake of Nietzsche’s thought, just at the moment when the violent reversal of the former structures needed a rationale, a motivation *founded* in some universal truth and ethics. The frustration resulted in an often-met schizophrenic behavior of many authors, who in their specialized contributions speak about the pluralism and the elusiveness of truth, while in their political articles criticize the lingering communist mentalities and the faults of transition in the name of some ethical and historical values of undeniable veracity, such as the national and cultural tradition, or the sacrifices of anti-communist fighters.¹⁷

I myself have contended in another text that, on the one hand, postcolonial studies is a distasteful field to many intellectuals who are now happy to discard the excessive communist indoctrination and, on the other, the postcolonial discourse that is occasionally mimicked by young scholars provides no template for broaching Soviet colonization¹⁸.

Though there is no direct and explicit evidence for the above suppositions, I think one might do well to consider the ideological (as well as the psychological) explanations for the general short-sightedness of critics who overlook the colonizing behaviour of the Soviet Empire. After all, these study areas are ideologically charged and working for the benefit of palpable political agendas.

Yet, apart from the ideological, there are also *epistemic* complications that may account for the inadequate treatment (or the lack thereof) of the relationship between

¹⁵ Moore, 117-8.

¹⁶ Moore, 117-118.

¹⁷ Radu Surdulescu, *The Raping of Identity, Studies in Physical and Symbolic Violence* (Iași: Institutul European: 2006), 97.

¹⁸ Ștefănescu, 39-41.

(post)colonialism and (post)communism. On occasion, some critics explicitly oppose the relevance of conflating the two fields and invoke various counterarguments.

Maria Todorova takes great pains to dismiss the thesis of the postcolonial character of Balkan cultures, though she concedes to certain similarities:

As already said, balkanism's discursive character pairs it naturally with orientalism. One of the many distinctions on which I insisted (others being question of race, colour, religion, language, gender, etc.) was the lack of a colonial predicament for the Balkans...¹⁹

She lists four arguments for denying a colonial status to the Ottoman Empire and she claims they apply not just to the Habsburg and Romanov empires, but also, more germane our concern, to the Soviet Union's relationship to Eastern European satellites:

First, there is no abyss or institutional/legal distinction between metropole and dependencies. Secondly, there is no previous stable entity which colonizes. The Ottoman Empire became an elaborate state machine and an empire in the course of shaping itself as an expanding polity, which was an organic whole in all its territories. Thirdly, there was no amelioration complex, no civilizing mission obsession comparable to the French or the English colonial project. Fourthly, there is no hegemonic cultural residue from the Ottoman Empire comparable to the linguistic and general cultural hegemony of English in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere, or of French in Africa and Indochina.²⁰

The case of the traditionally recognized empires is entirely outside the scope of this article, but I will briefly engage the applicability of Todorova's arguments for the USSR. I cannot say much about the first which is too vague and general for me to understand. But I find it inexplicable that a critic who is not a stranger to the communist experiment should claim that the Soviet Union was not a stable entity before occupying and culturally colonizing the Eastern European countries, that it had no messianic claims in liberating Europe from the fascist yoke or in guiding its brethren states to communist enlightenment, and that it did not leave an insidious hegemonic discourse in its wake that is apparent, among others, in the pathological dependency of postcommunist subjects to a providential leader or state and in the egalitarian clichés.

Anca Băicoianu is another opponent of the comparison and concludes her article on the topic with the claims that "although both post-colonialism and post-communism are derivative discourses enacting a drama of liminality, their particular contexts are far too different to be conflated" and that it would be inopportune for Postcommunist Studies to turn into a subfield of Postcolonial Theory²¹. Her argument rests on various

¹⁹ Maria Todorova, "Balkanism and Postcolonialism, Or on the Beauty of the Airplane View," in *InMarx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, Costică Brădășan and Serguei Alex. Oushakine, eds., (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), 177.

²⁰ Maria Todorova, "Balkanism and Postcolonialism," 179.

²¹ Anca Băicoianu, "Top Hat and Fur Cap: Postcolonialism, Postcommunism and Their Discontents," *Euresis* 1 (2005): 51-2.

differences between the postcolonial and the postcommunist. The former is the result of an empire being extended, the latter, of a system being exported, the former is founded on the universalism of the Enlightenment, the latter, on pre-modern egalitarianism, the former is the paragon, the latter is the transcendence of capitalism, the former is driven by a neurotic desire to become the other, whereas the latter is the captive of a schizoid hesitation between competing projections²².

Ion Bogdan Lefter also disputes that communism and colonialism are facets of the same condition²³. His arguments go along three lines:

- *politics*: Eastern European satellites were never administratively part of the Soviet empire, they were ruled by local communist parties who enjoyed a high degree of autonomy especially after the Khrushchev relaxation [unlike the Baltic states and Bessarabia who were actually colonized] ;

- *mentalities/self-perceptions* – Poles and Romanians, for instance, had a sense of independence (despite the Soviet influence), unlike the Baltic who saw themselves as occupied. Hence the neo-nationalist movements during communism.

- *culture/language* – unlike colonial spaces where the empires forced their languages and cultures, Romania and other Central European states were never Russophone during the Soviet occupation, unlike Francophone and Anglophone African countries.

Interestingly, he offers counterarguments to each of the above only to decide in the end against coloniality and to concede to Soviet satellites, at best, a semi-colonial status²⁴.

Janusz Korek lists as possible reasons for the reluctance to apply postcolonial theory to the so-called ‘Second World’ the fact that one is not dealing in this case with classical colonies, the insignificance of racial oppression which is paramount in colonies from the Third World, and the Soviet Union’s professing to be the ally of various anti-colonial struggles²⁵.

The last of the three is too naïve to deserve attention—I can hardly think that a serious critic would fail to see that the USSR was advocating the cause of colonies of the Western powers only in order to undermine its capitalist opponents, but had no

²² Băicoianu, “Top Hat and Fur Cap,” 49, 51.

²³ Ion Bogdan Lefter, “Poate fi considerat postcomunismul un post-colonialism?” *Caietele Echinox* 1 (2001): 119.

²⁴ Lefter is joined by other Romanian critics in ascribing only a semi-colonial status to Romania and other Eastern European countries of the communist bloc: Carmen Andraș, “Romania in British Travel Literature Discursive Geography and Strategies for Liminal Space”, <http://www.phantasma.ro/caiete/caiete/caiete5/10.html>; Marius Lazăr, “Divisions of the Political Elites and the Making of the Modern Romanian State (1859–1940),” in *Cultural Dimensions of Elite Formation in Transylvania (1770–1950)*, eds. Victor Karady and Borbála Zsuzsanna Török, 216-259 (Cluj-Napoca: EDR Foundation, 2008); Radu Surdulescu, “Identity-Raping Practices: Semicolonialism, Communist Reeducation, and Peer Torture,” *Euresis* 1 (2005): 68. The concept of semi-colonialism has also been employed by foreign scholars to describe Eastern Europe and postcommunism: Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* (Abington and New York: Routledge, 1998), 169 [for 17th & 18th c. East Central Europe]; Ronald J. Horvath, “A Definition of Colonialism,” *Current Anthropology* 13, 1 (1972): 49; Henry F. Carey and Rafal Raciborski, “Postcolonialism,” 206 and passim. Todorova (*Imagining the Balkans*, 16) contests the validity of such a description for Eastern Europe.

²⁵ Janusz Korek, “Central and Eastern Europe from a Postcolonial Perspective.”, 2007, <http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/index.php/en/essays/60--central-and-eastern-europe-from-a-postcolonial-perspective>.

problem treating peoples in its own empire in a colonialist fashion. Does one seriously consider that in the USSR people lived freely in the most advanced form of democracy based on the Soviet officials professing that publicly? But the first two arguments quoted by Korek do pose valid epistemic challenges.

Should we dismiss Soviet colonialism in Eastern Europe because satellite countries were not classical colonies? In his theoretical overview of colonialism, Jürgen Osterhammel seems to suggest this might prove a simplistic argument that fails to acknowledge the complexity of colonialism. He warns against identifying colonization with colony creation. Not only is there no such thing as *a* classical colony (in fact there are three major types: exploitation, maritime, and settlement colonies, with three subtypes for the latter), but there can be “colonialism without colonies” where colonialist domination occurs “within national states or regionally integrated land empires”, just as there can be “colonies without colonialism.”²⁶ It should also be noted that colonies and colonialism are not commonly predicated upon racial differences and that race is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for determining whether we are in the presence of a colonial relationship.

Consequently, one may safely consider certain cultures to have been colonized and to have then undergone a process of decolonization without technically having ever been colonies in the restrictive traditional sense of the term. Hence, it may be the wrong question to ask whether so-and-so former USSR republic or satellite was truly a colony. Instead, one should concern oneself with such cultures having been colonized at all—which is a significantly different matter.

My siblings metaphor in the title suggests a degree of relatedness and family resemblance between two separate individuals. However, most of the times critics advocate or reject the notion that (post)communism and (post)colonialism might be one and the same thing. Hence the frequent question, *but was Romania/Eastern Europe really a colony/colonized?*

The answer to this question is at the same time the answer to the question whether postcommunism and postcolonialism are the same thing or simply similar/related things. I will contend in this article that an adequate answer of this sort requires not just a definition of the terms colony/colonialism/colonization (and their postcommunist counterparts), but also a certain theory of such conceptual descriptions.

Given the wide discrepancy between the uses of these terms and between the conflicting critical claims one realizes that whether one answers “yes, Romania was a colony/colonized”, “no, it never was” or “only partly so” one is both right and wrong at the same time in each of these answers.

How is that possible? Because *colony* and its derivatives are exceptionally tricky words. To start with, like most key concepts in the humanities and the human sciences, they do not have a consensual meaning – especially in the postmodernist and poststructuralist age, when everything is epistemologically so complicated. The range for the applicability of the term *colony* and its derivatives runs from very narrowly specified territories or political organizations to the most immaterial and symbolic spaces (hence the common phrase “colonization of the mind”). We have seen

²⁶ Osterhammel, 10-18.

Osterhammel distinguish between exploitation, maritime, and settlement colonies in recent world history. Henry F. Carey and Rafal Raciborski analyze the particular Soviet sphere of colonization into classical colonies (Central Asia), inner colonies (the Transcaucasus and the European republics), and arguable or semicolonies (Central and Eastern Europe).

To illustrate the mind-boggling complexity of these terms I will take just one subcategory within the general conceptual frame of colonialism. The term *inner colony* by which Carey and Raciborski refer to Soviet republics that have been transformed by industrialization and relatively marginalized while fervidly guarding their linguistic and cultural differences is doubled by Michael Bernhard, Christopher Reenock, and Timothy Nordstrom. These authors talk of *European Internal Colonies* which include the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, but also Norway, Andorra, Malta or Iceland, that is, places where modernization was less forced than in the overseas colonies and where there was relative overlapping between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized.²⁷ In addition, the notion of *internal colonization* was used by African-American activists of the 1960s (Eldridge Cleaver, Kenneth Clark, and Stokely Carmichael) to show that white exploitation and discrimination of the blacks in the United States was consubstantial with that in colonies proper. Michael Hechter also employed the concept of *internal colonialism* to describe the power relations between the center and the peripheries of the British Isles.²⁸ Nidhi Trehan and Angéla Kóczé have characterized the situation of the Romani population in Europe as *internal colonization* based on Fanon's operators, infantilization and denigration²⁹.

These examples alone will amply demonstrate why *colony* and its derivatives are deeply ambiguous terms since their various definitions and uses manage to capture only in part their "multifaceted" and confounding nature³⁰.

In addition, *colony* and its derivatives are duplicitous words—very much like *man* or *liberal*. They are duplicitous because they play unfair tricks and facilitate discrimination between members of the same category.

Take the word *man*, for example. Man is both the *generic* term for human beings, and the word for a *particular* type of human being – the male. A linguistic sleight of hand that has inflamed many a feminist since de Beauvoir and has caused an avalanche of protests until it was replaced by gender indifferent terms. Obviously, the duplicitous

²⁷Michael Bernhard, Christopher Reenock, and Timothy Nordstrom, "The Legacy of Western Overseas Colonialism on Democratic Survival," *International Studies Quarterly* 48, 1 (March 2004): 225-250.

²⁸Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

²⁹Nidhi Trehan and Angéla Kóczé, "Racism, (neo-)colonialism, and social justice: the struggle for the soul of the Romani movement in post-socialist Europe," in *Racism, Postcolonialism, Europe*, Graham Huggan and Ian Law eds., (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 59.

³⁰Melvin E. Page states in the Preface to his encyclopedia that "colonialism has been understood in a variety of ways" and it has been used to refer to "any sort of domination or assertion of control by one human group over another" throughout history (Melvin E. Page, *Colonialism: An International Social, Cultural, and Political Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), xxi). Hugh Seton-Watson spoke of the "multiformity of colonialism" which makes it difficult to define (qtd in Carey and Raciborski, "Postcolonialism: A Valid Paradigm for the Former Sovietized States and Yugoslavia?" *East European Politics and Societies* 18:2 (2004): 199). Jürgen Osterhammel finds colonialism to be "a phenomenon of colossal vagueness" (Osterhammel, 4).

use of the word man to name both a human being and a male licensed the notion being a male is the normative instance of being a human, whereas the female is no more than an exception.

Liberal is itself such a treacherous term. Leaving aside the multiplicity of almost unrelated visions and actions that are all called “liberal” and treated as if they were part of the same tradition, the word has a *generic* meaning which brings together all varieties of ideologies and political systems that guarantee the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens (as in “liberal democracies”), but it is also used with a *particular* meaning to point to just one ideology or political doctrine out of many of equal standing (like conservatism, social-democracy, anarchism, socialism etc.). This double use tacitly privileges liberalism over other ideologies by making it the exemplar of all modern democratic doctrines.

In the case of such words as *man* or *liberal*, there is an inherent ambiguity when using such a term because one particular case in a class of equally ranking members is elevated above the others and made to prevail as the “normal” or “standard” instance of that category of related things, whereas the others seem like merely eccentric or anomalous deviations.

This is also the case of *colony* and of its derivatives. The word has both a generic and a particular meaning. On the one hand, most scholars accept that there is an all-inclusive meaning of *colony* that refers to all objects of invasion and domination. This *general* meaning is so accommodating that it really accepts as the object of colonization *anything* (humans, territories, social or political frameworks, cultures, and even abstract or mental domains) and in *any* historical context (from prehistory to the 21st century).³¹ On the other hand, *colony* is used for a *somewhat particular* instance of invasion and domination: the acquisition, exploitation, and control of a foreign territory. This is only half-way between the all-encompassing generic meaning and the *entirely particular* one which is evoked when used in a highly restrictive sense by scholars to focus exclusively on capitalist Western or West European imperial powers (most of the times British and American) which acquired, exploited, and controlled overseas lands that were inhabited by racially non-white populations.

This is why I asserted it does not really matter if your answer to “Was Romania/Eastern Europe really a colony/colonized?” is “yes”, “no” or “partly so” since you will always be both right and wrong. If your answer is “yes”, you are right according to the *general* sense of *colony/colonization/colonialism* and you are dead wrong according to its very *restrictive* meaning (colonies of Western capitalist powers). Conversely, if your answer is “no”—well, it is quite simply the other way around. And even when you modify your answer to “partly so” you are complying with the general and the relatively particular meanings of colony, but you will still be rebuked by the even more particular scholars who will protest that these were not overseas possessions of Western powers that were inhabited by non-white populations.

³¹ Melvin E. Page notes that “colonialism” is used to describe widely different historical situations from “the extension of the range of early *hominids* out of Africa into many regions of Eurasia” to the “overwhelming impact of new technologies on human life in the twenty-first century” (xxi). Page, *Colonialism*, xii.

It is very seldom that scholars distinguish between these different levels of generalization. In fact, the norm seems to be that they make generic claims about colonialism by analysing exclusively one of its particular instances, capitalist Western colonialism. The exemplary Melvin E. Page is once more a perfect illustration. In the preface to his encyclopedia of colonialism, he accepts the generic extended meaning of colonialism, but disregards all but the very restrictive meaning of Western modern colonialism. He warrants this extended use of the term: “Frequently these extended uses of the term colonialism offer politically satisfying characterizations of the human condition.” But, then, Page immediately steps back and selects the restricted meaning (that of “*modern colonialism*”, i.e. European colonialism from 1400 C.E.) on which he alleges there is “agreement among historians and other scholars” about the “particular (*sic!*) patterns of settlement, control of external lands, and associated ideologies of domination that first found expression in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of the common era”³². This is a remarkable example of an *encyclopedia* of something called generically “colonialism” that nonetheless professes it is only natural to focus on just a particular case (modern European colonialism).

The complicated mechanism of cultural and political positioning of East European countries is cause for further nuisance in establishing their (post)colonial status. Romania and neighbouring cultures already possessed the heritage of a neurotic, insecure Europeanism situated as they are at the Eastern extremity of the continent. Alexander Kiossev submits that marginal and transitional cultures at the Eastern edge of Europe are insecure about their identity which they relinquish in a strange act of “self-colonizing” by which they “lovingly colonize their own authenticity”³³.

Making things much worse, Soviet colonialism obfuscated the previously banal in-betweenness of this cultural space that was once simply poised half-way between the Western civilization and the exotic Orient with Eastern Europe combining features from both extremes of this binary opposition. With the interpolation of the Soviet Empire, Eastern European countries were forced to adopt what I would call a “triangular identity formation”. A new pole was added and the usual binaries of postcolonial writing (West/Orient, us/them) were replaced by what may seem to most like an impossible positioning of the East European self between *three* others, at one and the same time adversarial and contaminating: The West, the Soviet Union, and the “Orient” (the colonial primitive).

Anca Băicoianu is only partly right when she offers a slightly more complicated identification scheme for postcommunist Europe (“double-centred peripherality”) in contrast to the simple opposition between peripheral self and imperial other with which postcolonial identification operates and when she talks of the manicheism by which the Eastern reference point is demonized while the Western one is idealized³⁴. What I propose is an even more complicated relationship, where the colonial periphery (the Orient or the Third World) becomes a third centre or reference point in the awkward positioning of the Sovietized Eastern European.

³² Page, xxi.

³³ Alexander Kiossev, “Notes on Selfcolonising Cultures,” in *Art and Culture in Post-communist Europe*, Pejić, B. & D. Elliott, eds., (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 114.

³⁴ Băicoianu, 51.

Also, instead of the simple manicheism, I would suggest that all three centres were at once repulsive and hypnotically powerful. The West was both coveted for its freedom and opulence and vilified for its betrayal and naiveté. The Soviet Union was on the one hand a national adversary and criminal oppressor and, on the other, an impressively massive and sly victor, as well as the champion of the poor and the unexceptional many. The Orientals/Third World colonial subjects were at once the spectre of the Eastern Europeans' own failure and barbaric backwardness, but they were also natives of a romantic paradise of exotic opulence, as well as former subalterns who had gained their freedom just as the Eastern Europeans were losing theirs. All of the three reference points had something that the Eastern European lacked: a definite identity. The Sovietised Eastern European was neither a clear winner, nor a clear victim, neither Western, nor Eastern, neither entirely civilized, nor an utter barbarian or natural man. To be a Sovietized Eastern European was to be *almost* like any of the three stable identities—but *not quite*—in an area of endless interference³⁵.

Inside this infinitely ambiguous area, Romania looks even more than others like a privileged candidate for ambiguity neurosis— a mongrelised cross between Greek Orthodoxy and linguistic Latinity, a Balkan country in the eyes of most which obstinately refuses to accept such a Balkan identity, and a country that is neither entirely Central, nor entirely East European, as illustrated, among others, by Timothy Garton Ash:

The term East Central Europe combines the criteria of post-1945 Eastern Europe and pre-1914 Central Europe. By post-1945 Eastern Europe one means the formally independent member states of the Warsaw Pact, apart from the Soviet Union. The term Central Europe is, of course, more problematic, but for the period before 1914 it may be taken to mean those countries that, while subsumed in one of the three great multinational empires (Austro-Hungarian, Prussian-German, or Russian), nonetheless preserved major elements of Western traditions: for example Western Christianity, the rule of law, some separation of powers, a measure of constitutional government, and something that could be called civil society. The Western Ukraine and the Baltic states are thus excluded by the first criterion, while Bulgaria is excluded by the second. *Romania is a borderline case. (emphasis mine)*³⁶

Such complications are, no doubt, a challenge for postcolonial critics as well, if we take Hélène Gill's word that postcolonialism is "a strand of oppositional, radical thought. . . [which] is tempted to adopt strongly contrasted binary positions. By the same token, it tends to be uncomfortable with in-between situations: unclear ethical dilemmas, ambivalent political attitudes, divided loyalties."³⁷

To sum up, Romanian/East European (post)coloniality presents itself as a nexus of ambiguities and uncertain identities. As a result, colonialism in such cases is what I call an *anamorphic* concept. In other words, East European cultures like Romania will

³⁵ Sorin Alexandrescu, *Identitate în ruptură. Mentalități românești postbelice*, trans. Mirela Adascalitei, Sorin Alexandrescu and Șerban Angheliescu (București: Univers, 2000), 12, 35-42.

³⁶ Timothy Garton Ash qtd. in Iver B. Neumann. *Uses of the Other: the "East" in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 145.

³⁷ Quoted in Alastair Bonnet, 98.

become whatever your critical angle enables you to see in them. I have borrowed this term from post-Renaissance art theory where it referred to images that were deliberately created in an ambiguous fashion and that could be seen to represent different things depending on the viewer's position, distance, or viewing angle and focus. The mannerist and the postmodern forms of perspectivism alike undermine the viewers' certainties in order to empower their subjectivity as the site of meaning being born out of (self-)questioning. Identification is a reciprocal challenge for both the subject and the object of contemplation, and anamorphosis is the technique that makes such a process symbolically visible.

In our case, the (post)colonial status of (post)communism can be seen as anamorphic, in other words, it is a question of methodological focus. In her polemical piece against the (post)coloniality of the Balkans, Maria Todorova confesses to the subjectivity of her hermeneutic stance:

Although I admit to a historical and even empirical bias, I still prefer to view the world from a plane rather than from a train. But, at the same time, I prefer to view the world from a plane rather than from a rocket, which I leave to the intrepid theoreticians. This does not mean that I claim a kind of privileged, "objective" middle road. I just prefer (for aesthetic and disciplinarian reasons) the middle range and middle velocity view, but, as we know, no view is more true than the other. It just gazes and reflects from different angles and distances. Here I am simply arguing that the historian's view can produce certain representations that can be missed from a gaze too close or too distant, and that I personally happen to consider these representations beautiful.³⁸

Though I do not share Todorova's flat rejection of the relevance of postcoloniality as an interpretive paradigm for the study of Eastern Europe, I welcome her epistemological metaphor. Indeed, you see something as colonized or as a colony depending on your methodological angle, on your broader or closer viewing, or on your ideological agenda. It is always the critical focus that dictates whether a people, a country, an institution, a culture or a mentality will be perceived as colonized. And the one certainty you are granted is that, looked at in a different manner, it will undermine whatever conclusions you have just drawn.

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O frăție cu rezerve: considerații metodologice despre relația complicată dintre postcolonialism și postcomunism

Statutul colonial al fostelor republici și state-satelit ale Uniunii Sovietice reprezintă o problemă stânjenitoare pentru mediile academice. Deși imperialismul colonial sovietic a fost amplu ilustrat prin numeroase lucrări de analiză și investigație, sintezele asupra colonialismului ignoră acest capitol și oferă o imagine distorsionată și centrată pe Occident a acestei categorii teoretice. Articolul de față elucidează posibilele cauze ale acestei reticente din partea cercetătorilor și propune anumite clarificări metodologice pentru a face față ambiguității noțiunii de colonialism și complicațiilor ce survin din poziția problematică a comunismului est-european.