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The Disintegration of "Power/Knowledge": Post-Socialist Studies as Decolonial Studies? A Personal Point of View. Part 1: Post-Colonialism, Balkanism and Self-Colonization

Abstract: The relationship between post-colonial and post-socialist studies is extraordinarily complex. Post-colonialists might argue that it can be approached from different perspectives as well as different power positions of knowledge production. As a result, I have chosen a specific trajectory that intersects and challenges the static power positions and is able to trace the debates and the unfolding of the complex problem over time. As a long-time scholar in this area, and moreover, one who has taken many different roads in both fields, I will describe this relationship from the perspective of my own scholarly biography.

However, my professional career has spanned several decades and surpassed the transient trends and fashions within this scholarly field. As such, it can only be depicted as an extensive narrative comprising multiple episodes.

Each episode showcases its unique scientific intrigue and unravels its own methodological peripeteia, all of which contribute to the overarching story I wish to share. Such complex material required a specific structure and organization, leading to the formation of three distinct parts of the story. These parts are published in sequence across the double issue of the journal *Studia Litteraria*, devoted to forms of engagement in contemporary Southern and Western Slavic literatures.

Keywords: post-colonial studies, self-colonization, post-socialist studies, Balkanism

Abstrakt: Relacja między studiami postkolonialnymi i postsocjalistycznymi jest niezwykle złożona. Badacze postkolonializmu stwierdzą, że można do niej podejść z różnych perspektyw, ale także z różnych pozycji władzy w produkcji wiedzy. W rezultacie wybrałem konkretną trajektorię, która przecina i kwestionuje statyczne pozycje władzy oraz jest w stanie prześledzić debaty i rozwój tego złożonego problemu w czasie. Jako wieloletni badacz w tej dziedzinie, a co więcej, osoba, która obierała wiele różnych dróg w obu podejściach – postkolonialnym i postsocjalistycznym – opiszę tę relację z perspektywy mojej własnej biografii naukowej. Moja kariera zawodowa obejmuje kilka dekad i wykracza poza przemijające trendy i mody w tej dziedzinie naukowej. W związku z tym można ją przedstawić jedynie jako obszerną narrację składającą się z wielu epizodów.

Każdy epizod ukazuje unikalną naukową intrygę i odkrywa własne metodologiczne perypetie, z których wszystkie składają się na nadrzędną historię, którą chcę się podzielić. Tak złożony materiał wymagał określonej struktury i organizacji, co doprowadziło do powstania trzech odrębnych części opowieści. Części te są kolejno publikowane w podwójnym numerze czasopisma „Studia Litteraria", poświęconym formom zaangażowania we współczesnych literaturach południowo- i zachodniosłowiańskich.

Słowa kluczowe: studia postkolonialne, samokolonizacja, studia postsocjalistyczne, bałkanizm

1. Post-Colonialism, Balkanism and Self-Colonization

In 1994, I wrote a short essay titled "Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures" (Kiossev 1995). The essay explored the creation of modern Bulgarian national culture, attempting to propose a model that could be valid for similar cultural formations elsewhere. I argued that in the 19th century, small nations emerged on the geographic periphery of colonial Europe. These nations, having been traditional populations of other premodern formations (e.g., the Ottoman Empire) and being relatively unimportant as far as Western colonial interests were concerned, were not formally conquered by the West. In the Age of Enlightenment, their elites yearned to be part of Europe, and they simply "imported" the imaginary "Europe," i.e., the missing colonizer. In other words, they began to imitate an idealized European civilization as a pattern for their own national cultures. The result of this problematic effort to catch up with the absent Western "modernity" was an eccentric and traumatic cultural identity based on paradoxes, the most important of which was the dominant feeling of "total absence," which I called "self-colonization" because it mediated the acceptance and internalization of the symbolic power of the external Great Other, Europe, without the traditional military colonization, conquistadors, armies, and violence.

At the time, I did not know that this short text would be read and commented on outside of Bulgaria, where it received a good deal of criticism and was greeted with disdain by professional historians. However, it garnered a large readership in Poland, Hungary, and the Balkans, and even in such faraway post-colonial countries as Peru and Ecuador.

When I wrote this essay, I was only vaguely familiar with post-colonial studies, although the genre was already unsettling the academic world. After the publication of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961 (Fanon 1963), with its emphasis on the psychological effects of colonialism, and especially after Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1978) and the analysis of the Western system of representations of the oriental "Other," the field began to gain momentum. The emergence of this new paradigm has been transforming Western universities, where researchers such as Semir Amin (Amin 1989), Gayatri Spivak (Spivak, Landry, MacLean 1996, Spivak 2012), Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty 2000), Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1990; Bhabha 1994), Bill Ashcroft (Ashcroft et al. 1989; Ashcroft, Kadhim 2001), Leela Gandhi (Gandhi 2019), Arif Dirlik (Dirlik 2001), and many others have gained international recognition.

2. Balkans, Balkanism, and Post-Colonial Studies: Controversies and Paradoxes

In the 1990s, a new type of research dedicated to the Balkan region emerged, which naturally piqued my interest.[1] At first glance, these studies appeared to be unrelated to the post-colonial and seemed to originate from specific local sources. Between 1991 and 2000, political conflicts and wars shook the Balkans, including the breakup of Yugoslavia and the bloody conflict between the former Yugoslav republics. War crimes and crimes against humanity came under investigation, and the old image of the region as a "powder keg" of chaos and violence was resurrected. The wars, and especially the Balkan refugees, created an urgent need in the West to examine the culture or cultures of this aggressive corner of the continent, now seen as dangerous for Europe and world peace. Journalists and public intellectuals argued that there was "too much history" in the Balkans, and that the region itself could not bear it. Once again, the Balkans became associated with wild nationalisms and a self-destructive "narcissism of small differences" (as Freud called it in his *Civilization and its Discontent* as early as 1930).

In the early 1990s, a flurry of publications by columnists, political experts, and military specialists emerged in response to the conflicts and wars that shook the Balkans. Later, more serious academic histories devoted to the region also appeared or underwent new editions,[2] but neither type of publication referenced postcolonial studies.

However, a new type of East European and Balkan studies also emerged, distinct from both journalism and traditional historiography. In 1994, Larry Wolff's magnificent book, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Wolff 1994), and in 1997, Maria Todorova's seminal *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 1997) appeared in English. These were serious historical studies based on extensive testimonies, but their focus was not on factual Balkan history. Rather, both authors investigated the region's clichéd names, stigmatizing labels, and narratives – in other words, the "systems of representations." Their critical focus was on the ideological repertoires of myths, images, and negative stereotypes with which the region was previously described in Western discourse. Other scholars, such as Milica Bakić-Hayden (Bakić-Hayden, Hayden 1992), Stathis Gourgouris (Gourgouris 1996), Vesna Goldsworthy (Goldsworthy 1998), and Božidar Jezernik (Jezernik 2003) made important contributions to this emerging field by exploring the ways in which the Balkans were constructed in Western imagination.

The Saidian "trace" seemed obvious. All of the works mentioned above implicitly operate within his framework of exposing and analyzing how the colonial

[1] I was already engaged in a deconstructive analysis of Western representations of the Balkans. In 1992, I published my paper "Mitteleuropa und der Balkan. Erotik der Geopolitik. Die Images zweier Regionen in den westlichen Massenmedien" in *Neue Literatur* (Kiossev 1992).

[2] The seminal history of the Balkans by Leften Stavrianos, originally published in 1958 and reissued in 2000 (Stavrianos 2000), has been followed by shorter but serious historiographical contributions by Mark Mazower (Mazower 2002), Holm Sundhausen (Sundhausen 1999; Sundhausen 2002), Raymond Detrez (Detrez, Plas 2005; Detrez 2008), Misha Glenny (Glenny 2017), and others.

West represents other parts of the world. Just as Said's concept of the "Orient" highlights the West's hegemonic construction of a symbolic "Other," the "Balkans" in Western discourse also emerge as a construct of the West. However, both Wolff and Todorova have argued that Eastern Europe and the Balkans had a paradoxical representational status. Unlike the absolute opposition between the West and the "Orient", due to their proximity and formal affiliation to Europe they were constructed as an ambivalent "internal Other" of Europe, characterized by both inclusion and exclusion. Both scholars emphasized the longstanding historical roots of the Western image of Southeast Europe, which can be traced back to the late Renaissance and which persisted through the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. However, the metaphor of "Balkanization" gained its modern connotations during the First World War. In the new millennium, the collapse of communism and the Yugoslav wars reignited the representation of the Balkans as an obscure, untamed, and perilous region, caught in an ambiguous space between Europe and Asia. This ambivalence elicits complex emotions of both identification and repulsion among European observers.

From the very beginning of the emergence of such studies, some Western scholars attempted to integrate them within the post-colonial paradigm, interpreting "Balkanism" as an Eastern European version of Orientalism. While some of these scholars briefly cited Said, a number of others were hesitant to embrace the growing influence of post-colonial theory.[3] Instead, they preferred to use methodological approaches related to "imagined geographies," without necessarily aiming to challenge colonialism.

With the exception of Milica Bakić-Hayden's notion of "nesting" Orientalism, the influence of Said's Orientalism has generally been acknowledged, albeit tepidly (Larry Wolf's work is a good example). Maria Todorova, who openly acknowledges her intellectual debt to Said, took a more critical approach in her book, dedicating an extended chapter to "Said's fallacy," in which she argues that Balkanism is not merely a subspecies of Orientalism and highlighting "the historical and geographic concreteness of the Balkans," when compared to the intangible nature of the Orient which has no concrete "geographical referent."[4] According to her, the static image of the Balkans could only be analyzed and critiqued via its connection to the detailed history of the region; she attempted to interpret Orientalism itself as a "subgenre" of the more general discipline of imagology, which focuses on literary images of Otherness. For her, the easy inclusion of Balkanism as a subdivision of Orientalism would turn the former into another illustration of an overly-generalized and abstract binarism without any contextual framework or historical specificity.

[3] This is particularly true of Larry Wolff's book; he quotes Said only once and admits that he himself considers not post-colonialists but rather the great minds of the European Enlightenment as his intellectual heroes.

[4] Todorova was not the only historian who pointed out that the feudal empires that ruled the region (Habsburg and Ottoman) were never colonial in the modern sense of the word; as a result, European colonialism did not leave serious historical and cultural traces in the Balkans, unlike the lasting legacies of Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire.

Several years later, K. Fleming, an American follower of Todorova, formulated similar arguments (see Fleming 2000). According to Fleming, the Balkans did not fulfill any of the conditions of the Foucauldian power/knowledge concept, upon which Said's analysis was based. There was no real modern colonial power in the region, and no serious body of Western academic scholarship that could serve the colonial administration, as was the case in India, Palestine, or Egypt. Therefore, according to Fleming, the symbiosis between power and knowledge, which make up the dual principles of all modern colonialism, was absent in the Balkans.

Globalists, representatives of critical theory, and post-colonialists, armed with analytical techniques derived from neo-Marxism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism, were not content to leave in peace the historical "localism," focusing on the specifics of the Balkans. In 2002, an ambitious collection of essays, *Balkans as a Metaphor*, edited by Dušan Bjelić and Obrad Savić (Bjelić, Savić 2003), displaced the Balkan issues from their specific historiography and a-political imagology towards the critical theory of globalization and the postcolonial condition. The collection was more concerned with the metaphor (i.e., the Saidian "system of representations") than with their relation to local historical realities. What was genuinely interesting were not the historical details, but the general way in which the neoliberal West constructs its Others. There were contributions by neo-Marxists, feminists, Lacanians, Foucauldians, and Derridians, inscribing the Balkan image into the global symbolic and libidinal economy of images and phantasms, a characteristic example being Toma Longinović's analysis of the "Balkans as a vampire" (Longinović 2003).

Unlike Todorova, several authors argued that the corpus of stigmatizing representations known as "Balkanism" is not necessarily and inevitably connected to the "historical heritage"[5] of the peninsula. Instead, it is a contemporary effect of the transition to the New World Order after the Dayton agreements. Therefore, for many authors, it is apparent that "Balkanism" is part of the discursive policy of this postcolonial global order and, as such, should be a division of Orientalism and post-colonial studies.[6] In this perspective, the Balkans are no longer seen as

[5] Elaborating on a post-Althusserian analysis of the discourse of Balkanism, the Slovenian philosopher and sociologist Rastko Močnik (Močnik 2003) accused Todorova of empiricism that exaggerates the role of the Ottoman legacy, at the expense of neglecting present ideological interpellations, part of the global symbolic dominance of neoliberal capitalism.

[6] In the foreword to this collection, the well-known anthropologist Michael Herzfeld succinctly and clearly stated that the stigmatizing representations of the Balkans should be viewed as evidence of a problem that originates mainly outside this emotionally loaded imaginary space (Herzfeld 2003, X). A little further on, Bjelić's introduction quotes Slavoj Žižek, who claims that Balkanism is merely one of the techniques employed by the West's new hegemony, enriched with a postmodern and Lacanian economy of desire. According to Žižek, wars, barbaric crimes, and ugliness are projected onto a peripheral region of Europe, enabling the West to purge itself of them and, thus, fall in love with itself again by becoming "beautified" and idealized" (Bjelić 2003, 9).

a specific place, but rather as a floating, a-territorialized semiotic effect of the global hegemonic discourse.[7]

In 2005, Maria Todorova responded to such notions with an article entitled "Balkanism and Postcolonialism or On the Beauty of the Airplane View,"[8] where she expressed frustration with the sweeping generalizations of critical and post-colonial theory:

> The problem is, of course, that in a way postcolonialism itself became a new metanarrative, although it is only fair to say that despite some conservative hysteria, it has never been really institutionalized. There are no departments, centers or programs in postcolonial studies, whereas incomparably more attention is paid to and means given for the study of globalization, for example…

She then predicted a "melancholic phase" (Todorova 2018, 98) and even the end of postcolonial studies, and added with irony that such super-generalizations were akin to the view from afar provided by a rocket, which comfortably annihilates all such confusing details.

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I found myself caught in between the poles of an unresolved dispute. As a result, I began reading, indiscriminately, Balkan historiography, analyses of representations of the Balkans, critical theory, and post-colonialism. Among the various opinions I encountered, Maria Todorova's gradually began to appear the most accurate. Many of the "global" analyses dedicated to the Balkans lacked even elementary historical knowledge of the region, performing frivolous "deconstructions" of its complex, concrete reality. In their hands, local facts were made to obey the basic tenets of neo-Marxism, deconstruction, or post-colonialism with surprising ease. A possible analogy came to mind: just as the West essentialized and demonized its Others, its theoretical critics (neo-Marxists, post-structuralists, globalists, and post-colonialists) relegated the Balkans to the realm of vague non-concreteness and transformed it into a mere illustration of their theory. The use

[7] Even the editor of the collection and the author of the introduction, Dušan Bjelić, was aware of the objections of historians such as Todorova and ostensibly supported them in the concreteness of the Balkans. However, he belonged to the critical theory and and that's why he implicitly joined the "globalists." He attempted to take a middle path by arguing that if the Balkans were not simply an effect of the global hegemonic Symbolic Order, it was because they were a specific paradox within it. According to Bjelić, Balkan history itself shows that the roles of colonizers and colonized are mixed. For example, the Serbs had medieval empires within which they were colonizers, then they fell under Ottoman rule and found themselves colonized, and now they are again trying to become colonizers of the other peoples of the former Yugoslavia (Bjelić 2003, 1–22).

[8] She opens her analysis with an explicit reference to Bjelić, describing the context of the debate: "In May 2004, I participated on a panel at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities in New York. Together with Dušan Bjelić, Alexander Kiossev and Gayatri Spivak, the panel discussed the theoretical and methodological relations between balkanism and postcolonialism and, in a broader sense, the possible benefits that opening toward the paradigm of postcolonialism can bring upon East European studies in general. This is the outcome of this debate…." (Todorova 2018, 93).

of reductionist general terms such as "Empire," "corporate capitalism," and "the system of binarisms" suggested a unified and simplified version of world history, often based on the world-system theory with its centers, peripheries, and semi-peripheries. This implied a single agency and direction of global history – similar to the petrified Grand Narrative that Todorova feared. Due to this reduction, peripheral subjects were once again denied their concrete and specific historicity and were reduced to minor effects of the grand Historical Battle between global neoliberal hegemony and the academic left, which tirelessly engaged in a bold deconstruction of every "binarism."

Although I was initially drawn to post-structuralism, Todorova's compelling arguments led me to shift towards a historical approach. My perspective moved away from a nation-centric view towards a position somewhere between "transfer history" and "entangled history." Rather than being fixated on how Bulgarian culture arose in abstract semiotic binarism with its European "Other," I found it far more intriguing to explore the simultaneous and intertwined emergence of various Balkan projects and realities. This multiple process involved a heterogeneous range of factors, including European universities, missionaries of Western civilization, national ideologists, local cultural organizations, newspapers, religious denominations, ethnic minorities, and various transnational agents with fluid identities and cross-border biographical trajectories. In my understanding of entangled history, both real and imaginary agencies played a role. The dominant discourse of colonial Europe was introduced to the Balkans, not through forceful colonization, but rather by local individuals who were often Western-educated *Kulturträgers* ("Europeanized" merchants, intellectuals, priests, teachers, journalists, poets, political leaders, etc.). Through this process, the "Symbolic Order of the Great Other" was no longer an imposition from outside the region. Unhindered by the weight of colonial violence, mediated by the deep and intimate feelings of the *Kulturträgers,* this idealized image of "European civilization" was embraced by local "modernizers" and permeated many aspects of society, much like a "genetic code" of emerging national cultures.

The dominant discourse of "European civilization" set standards for public discourse and good manners, established models for textbooks and literary genres, interfered with cultural practices in everyday life in the Balkans, dictated the usage and misusage of "Ottoman legacies," and penetrated what anthropologists refer to as "cultural intimacy." However, in this process of molecular penetration, it was neither identical to itself nor something external, a forced "system of representations" that external colonial knowledge-producing institutions imposed on their "Oriental Other," as Said argued. As a symbolic system, Balkan "Eurocentrism" could not be controlled from its missing "Center," resulting in the multiplication of its arbitrary local usages. Within the hybrid environment of the Balkans, it disseminated, changed, and adapted repeatedly, encountering diverse local needs, practical issues, and mixing with "native" narratives, utopias, and phantasms. Its concepts, values, and discourses were constantly discussed, displaced, mimicked, and misunderstood. They were changed and adapted, trans-

lated and assimilated by the heterogeneous multiplicity of local actors, who had never experienced real colonial power and repressions.

In this confusing process, modern cultures emerged in the Balkans (such as those of Greeks, Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Romanians, Bulgarians, Albanians, and their respective minorities and micro-groups), both opposed to the "decaying corpse" of the Ottoman Empire and in a condition of mutual rivalry. Each constructed their own version of "Europe" and adapted it to their own attitudes, prejudices, needs, and interests.[9]

My experiences led me to an important realization – that sometimes, what seems distant is actually very close. This was a remarkable counter-irony in Todorova's ironic "rocket" metaphor, since certain global phenomena, such as climate change or military dislocations, can only be observed by systems of satellites, and not through close-up perspectives. Moreover, as an undergraduate lecturer, I was tasked with presenting a general introductory course on the cultural history of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. In order to provide a more nuanced understanding of modernity to my students, I needed to address its dark colonial side as well. This forced me to leave aside local issues and to explore instead global colonial relations: the asymmetrical production of knowledge and space, racial stereotypes, biopolitics, and processes of inhuman objectification, and counter examples of in-between subjectivation and traumatic identity building. To educate myself on these topics, I eagerly read works by post-colonial theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Arif Dirlik, and Bill Ashcroft, while also delving into the theory of globalization, hybrids, and global flows. I helped organize scholarly forums on these topics in post-socialist Sofia, including a follow-up seminar to a conference at Columbia University in 2004 (where the "rocket" dispute between Todorova and Dušan Bjelić took place). I was fortunate enough to meet Gayatri Spivak at the Columbia conference and invite her to Sofia. In 2006, we hosted a discussion with Spivak and Bulgarian colleagues on the problem of compatibility between post-colonialism and post-socialism: our seminar was entitled "Ensuring Compatibility, Respecting Differences."[10]

[9] During this period, I published several works (Kiossev 2003; 2008) dedicated to the question of how these multiple imaginaries infiltrated the various levels of Balkan realities. These were individual case studies, elaborating on how various "absences" and "distances" intervened in the knots of entangled history. The essays I wrote at that time had various focuses, including the power dynamics at play, performative identifications, and the "dark" aspects of Balkan culture. My research interests revolve around the complexities of the Balkan region, particularly the ways in which multicultural cities have been forcefully nationalized (as explored in Kiossev 2006), and the centripetal mythohistories and narratives that shape the Balkan region (as explored in Kiossev 2007). In addition, I am interested in the relationship between shared anthropological culture and diverging national cultures (as explored in Kiossev 2002). Such interests have led me to collaborate with a team of researchers on two large interdisciplinary Balkan projects: "Nexus" (2000–2003) and "Roles, Identities and Hybrids" (2003–2006). Both of these projects focused on the dynamic construction of space within a condition of "overlapping maternities" (as discussed in Kiossev and Kabakchieva 2009).

[10] The participants were Gayatri Spivak, Petya Kabakchieva, Alexander Kiossev, Todor Hristov, Dessislava Lilova, Tanya Stoicheva, Ralitza Muharska, Albena Hranova and Darin Tenev; the seminar is mentioned in Gayatri Spivak's *Nation and Imagination*, 2010.

The accumulated arguments forced me to oscillate between case studies and more general and theoretical problems. This led to a revision of my essay from 1995 and to the writing of a new piece, entitled "The Self-Colonization Metaphor" (Kiossev 2008). In that essay, the thesis of the "self-colonizing nation" was limited to a metaphorical name for the historical period of nation-building in the Balkans, within the context of the 19th century's global colonial processes. An attempt was made to merge Bulgarian, Balkan, and global-colonial perspectives while preserving the chance for further specific case studies. The general theoretical claim was that the penetration of the colonial imagination did not follow the borders of the territories actually conquered by the 19th-century colonial Empires but also extended beyond them, into opaque spaces in-between them and old pre-modern Empires. The modern Eurocentric imagination produced paradoxes in these intermediary places. Unlike genuine colonized countries such as India, where there is said to have been a birth of "domination without hegemony" (Guha 1998), in self-colonizing societies it produced a mirrored "hegemony without dominance." From this self-colonizing perspective, the dark side of modernization was scarcely noticeable, and the "ideal Europe" was not seen as a conqueror; therefore it could not be easily identified with the "evil Empire." Nevertheless, the ideas of Enlightenment and of European modernity in such intermediary places had a greater chance of being accepted uncritically, at their face value and their ultimate potential, and to be inscribed in the realm of unquestioned values and models, internalized and constitutive for the cultures of the new nations.

After further reading, I discovered that the theme of "modernity, nation, colonialism, imagination" has been extensively explored by a variety of notable scholars over the years, including Homi Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, Charles Taylor (Taylor 2003), and Frederic Cooper (Cooper 2005). Even the key concept itself underwent transformations, shifting from "post-colonialism" to "de-coloniality" or "decolonization," connected to shifting positions of knowledge production and political radicalization. Moreover, many researchers working on topics concerning Eastern Europe and post-Soviet republics have been using the concept of "colonialism" since at least 2010, and it has already become a normalized methodological tool within the field.

However, this process was accompanied by shifts in the meaning of fundamental concepts (not only "colonialism," but also "post-colonialism," "internal colonialism," "Empire," and "legacy," for example), which we will discuss in the subsequent parts of this essay.

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