

DIALECTICS OF INTERNAL COLONIZATION

Andrei Gornykh

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© Andrei Gornykh

Professor, European Humanities University, Academic Department of Social Sciences

17 Savičiaus Str., 01127 Vilnius, Lithuania

E-mail: andrei.gornykh@ehu.lt

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8191-5514>

Abstract: The postcolonial paradigm has evolved through various conceptual advancements, from the anthropological concept of “skin” as the basis of dual oppression based on class and race to the semiotic treatment of “skin” as a social interface constructed in practices of “writing on bodies” and discourses. The decolonization in our region raises a new set of problems. On the one hand, it refers to a complex cultural palimpsest. As a basic text of modernity, we have the colonization of the countryside by the city. But on top of the division of the city and the countryside other dividing lines are superimposed: ethnolinguistic divisions (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian) and the divisions of imperial and democratic forces. On the other hand, the figure of the Russian colonizer has a specific, neurotic character – a “neurotic view” of its position in the world, the fear of being colonized. And this neurotic fear is displaced from external enemies to internal ones. The Russian Empire, confronting external forces, constantly encounters not only an imaginary enemy, but imperceptibly turns back to itself as a colonized colonizer.

Keywords: postcolonialism, decolonization, discursive “skin”, cultural palimpsest.

The term “decolonization” has gained significant prominence in recent years. In part it might be viewed as a reaction to the expansion (or even



erosion) of the postcolonial paradigm. Classical postcolonialism has been the theoretical basis for the new cultural policies of non-white Western intellectuals to a considerable degree. In his canonical text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon formulates the basic conflict: the forced integration of blacks into the white metropolitan world was accompanied by a constant reminder of the futility of these attempts. “The Negro arriving in France will react against the myth of the R-eating man from Martinique. He will become aware of it, and he will really go to war against it. He will practice not only rolling his R but embroidering it. Furtively observing the slightest reactions of others, listening to his own speech, suspicious of his own tongue – a wretchedly lazy organ – he will lock himself into his room and read aloud for hours – desperately determined to learn diction” (Fanon 2008: 11).

These attempts prove to be futile precisely because he is black. He is radically different at the most basic empirical level. So he has no choice, in what way he must prove that he is the same person as the whites in the metropolis. Unless he is Michael Jackson and he doesn't have the ability to literally replace his black skin with white.

Thus, exposing discrimination based on obvious external signs of “interface” (or “skin” in the broad sense of conspicuous appearance features) played a fundamental role in the deconstruction of colonial stereotypes of “normality”. The purpose of this kind of deconstruction was to remove the “Western glasses”, which meant, firstly, to understand non-Western cultures not as a lack of culture (genuine, European culture), but as an authentic culture in its own right, to affirm the non-imaginary existence of non-European cultures, for example, in the form of American jazz or French Negritude poetry.

Secondly, one needs to understand non-Western cultures as having their own advantages over the West. For example, black culture is a culture of collective rhythm and emotional emancipation, etc.

What parameters of this old colonial West can be applied to contemporary imperial Russia? To what extent do the former Soviet republics act as the new “Africa”? These polemical questions outline the first circle of research problems of decolonization. The important task here is to break the vicious circle of “double silence”, as David C. Moore puts it (Moore 2001): postcolonial theory prefers not to talk too much about the post-Soviet space, and Slavists do the same about postcolonial theory.

Post-colonialists, Moore believes, with their Marxist sympathies, do not want to shift the focus of their criticism from global capitalism to socialism. Researchers from the former socialist countries are cultivating a new European identity and do not want to compare their

experiences with Africa (in a broad sense, of course, as an epitome of a colonized world).

“...Many postcolonialist scholars, in the United States and elsewhere, have been Marxist or strongly left and therefore have been reluctant to make the Soviet Union a French- or British-style villain. The reluctance, in contrast, of most scholars of the post-Soviet sphere to make a mirrored move – to recognize that their situations might profitably be analyzed with postcolonialist tools initially developed for, say, Tanganyika – may be laid to different reasons... This postcolonial compensatory tug plays out differently in post-Soviet space, since post-colonial desire from Riga to Almaty fixates not on the fallen master Russia but on the glittering Euramerican MTV-and-Coca-Cola beast that broke it. Central and Eastern Europeans type this desire as a return to Westernness that once was theirs” (Moore 2001: 117–118). This gap between the postcolonial and the postsocialist has caused the depoliticization of postcolonial studies, which were originally largely based on analysing the intensification of class oppression of people with black skin. Fanon calls it “inferiority complex” as “the outcome of a double process: primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalization – or, better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority” (Fanon 2008: 4).

An interesting, although not uncontroversial, attempt at the convergence of post-colonial and post-socialist studies is A. Etkind’s concept of “internal colonization” as a version of extended postcolonialism. Internal colonization, as a first approximation, consists of pumping out resources from one’s own outskirts as colonies. One can say that Russian “blacks” are originally northern peoples who bring peltry and furs for the Moscow tsar during the “fur colonization” as a first historical stage of Russian internal colonization (Etkind 2011: 66).

Here, perhaps, the most symptomatic post-colonial post-Soviet narrative is a story about the mysterious death of the tourist group of students at a place that is called now Dyatlov Pass (the Ural mountains) named after the leader of the group. In the 21st century, the “Dyatlov Pass” event has inspired a lot of documentaries, a film and a TV series where the northern people of the “Mansi” – one of the first to take the blow of colonization – become something like a post-colonial fantasy of revenge on the grandchildren of the colonialists. In the same way as S. Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) demonstrates a mystical revenge of ancient local spirits on whose land the colonial hotel was built, and the sacred objects of the destroyed culture became the decoration of a luxurious alien resort.

Elena Gapova hypothesizes that the specificity of the “post-Soviet colonial turn” lies in the fact that the concept of internal colonization replaces the Marxist categories of class (economic) inequality:

“For a long time, the oppression experienced by the masses in the Russian Empire was interpreted as class inequality, the oppression of one class by another; with the switch to the idea of (internal) colonization by the elites of their own people, some types of oppression and difference begin to be presented differently; ‘other’ oppressed people emerge” (Gapova 2006).

According to Oushakine, these oppressed may, for example, self-identify on the basis of being deprived not so much of their natural resources as of their own history: “Consequently, decolonization is rarely perceived as a striving for a different future; rather it is predominantly viewed as a ‘war in the name of the stolen past’, as a fight for enabling ‘disabled histories’” (Oushakine 2017, 431).

Herein lies the trap of post-Soviet postcolonialism – or, in Oushakine’s version, the “growth disease” of new national identities. For their own legitimization, they turn to their legendary past, when they themselves controlled vast territories (in the case of Kyrgyzstan, for example, the great Khaganate from Siberia to the Caspian Sea). “Such an ‘archaeology of dignity’ is an (un)conscious attempt to escape from directly analyzing and elaborating the experience of living as part of an empire. And the fact that this imagined and pre-colonial past often turns out to be quasi-imperial only further demonstrates the historical complexity of the (post)Soviet ‘formation’, in which the ‘(post)imperial’ is often indistinguishable from the ‘(post)colonial’ and vice versa.” (Oushakine 2021: 401).

In our opinion, the most important factor that sheds light on this historical frustration is the attitude to the project of Soviet modernity. On the one hand, the refusal to “work through the experience of living as part of an empire” can be explained by particular traumatization of this experience, on the other hand – by the difficulty of distancing oneself from this experience. Sergei Abashin wrote about this in his article “Soviet = colonial?” (Abashin 2016). Many classic features of colonialism, in his opinion, can be observed in the first decades of the USSR – military conquest of territories, brutal repression of national elites, political inequality, siphoning off resources. But already in the post-Stalin period these features were not so vivid. On the one hand, the features of Stalin’s more massive internal colonization – the brutal exploitation of the entire “Soviet people” – emerge: no stable wages (collective farmers had no wages at all), no stable working standards, “normativity” (which opened the way for arbitrariness and over-exploitation, especially in the countryside), no social protection system, etc. On the other hand, beneath this internal colonization there is the logic of modernization as such – urbanization (or the exploitation

of the countryside by the city), colonization (gaining super-profits as competitive advantages), militarization.

“All countries, including the Soviet state, had a common path, which included elements of colonialism /.../ [On the other hand] formally all Soviet citizens were endowed with the same rights and duties, which in itself was already a significant step away from colonial systems. Not only the republics, but all regions and population groups in general were centrally governed. Such centralism is more characteristic not of empires, where local norms and customs are always preserved and maintained, but of mobilizing, totalitarian states of the modern time” (Abashin 2016: 36, 46). In this case, the concept of modernity acts as a kind of genealogical origin of post-colonialism and post-communism. This approach allows us to make further clarifications.

Catching-up modernization (which was the basis of the Soviet project) is in fact total mobilization. The discursive construction “new oppressed” takes place, above all, in relation to various forms of homogenization of the entire population. However, it happens not with the aim of erasing national differences for their own sake, but to obtain a social machine with completely unified “parts”.

The iconic pre-war Stalinist song “If War Comes Tomorrow” (lyrics by Vasily Lebedev-Kumach, music by the Pokrass brothers) was played in the homonymous movie directed by Efim Dzigan (1938).

The first lines of the text reveal the ideological message of the song:

If war comes tomorrow, if the enemy attacks,
If a dark force should come,
As one man, the entire Soviet people
Will stand up for their beloved Motherland.

Chorus

On earth, in the sky and on the sea
Our tune is mighty and harsh:
If war comes tomorrow, if tomorrow there's a march,
Be ready for the march today!

The last phrase of the refrain, like a mantra, is repeated several times and the song ends with it.

“Be ready!” Here and now. — For what? For a possible war, for a certain “march” (it is not known where and with what goals). This future Event, for which one must be constantly ready at every minute, is important not in itself, but as an external sanction for the mode of constant mobilization of consciousness.

Soviet physical educators were to complete the GTO (“ready for labor and defense”) complex and pass a kind of test. Workers at rallies would declare: “We, as one, are ready...” (to defend, condemn, etc.). Pioneers were expected to respond to the obligatory ritual call “Be ready!” (as a culmination of various official events) with a slogan “Always ready!”

This ideological cliché is also associated with the poetry of Lebedev-Kumach — the poem “Be Ready!” (1936), in which the poet addresses the Pioneer:

Be cheerful, swim, jump,
Burn fires among the bushes,
But to bend your face over a book
Be ready! — Always ready! etc.

You have to be ready for basically everything. The main thing is this constant readiness for force-majeure circumstances. This is what everyday work (characterized by the militaristic rhetoric like “battles for the harvest”, “labor feats”, etc.) and life in general turn out to be like.

The final text of this mobilization discourse is a satirical parody of it in the film *Heart of a Dog* (Vladimir Bortko, 1988), where a chorus of proletarian “lower classes” sings a song like a prayer (written by Yuli Kim):

Harsh years of struggle
For the freedom of the country pass,
Others are coming after them.
They will be difficult too.

The main thing is to be ready. To be ready to meet the “dark force” — this image was not invented by Lebedev-Kumach, but can be traced back to the times of the 1905 revolution and its anthem “Warszawianka” by Waclaw Świącicki, which began with the words (translated by G. M. Krzhizhanowski):

The whirlwinds of hostility are upon us,
Dark forces oppress us.

The “dark force” represents an empty structural position that can be filled by a specific actor — the fascist “dark force”, or “the accursed horde” (Finns, Japanese, British, etc. — as the case may be).

This is not merely a matter of political horse-trading, rather, it constitutes a systematic production of anxiety and readiness, which is only confirmed by the presence of specific enemies.

What is central to this poetic discourse of Stalinism is that “to be ready” means to be a Soviet man par excellence. To be a “universal soldier”, fully interchangeable with others in any position wherever “the Motherland will send”, which determines the efficiency of the entire social Machine.

Thus if the classical imperial way of life (e.g. Rome) is a privilege (right to weapons, politics, culture), a way of demarcation from barbarians (who are kept at a distance by their customs), the Soviet way of life is a universal duty like military duty.

In this context, the difficulties of the dialogue between postcolonialism and postcommunism become clearer. Post-colonial studies oppose modernity as a European monopoly on civilization. For many post-communist authors who base their projects of national revival on a return to European values, these critiques of modernity seem consonant with a communist discourse that employed anti-colonial rhetoric not without reason, distinguishing itself from classical Western empires (which coincides, according to Moore, with the views of Western leftist intellectuals).

Dipesh Chakrabarty shows the intrinsic connection between Europe’s cultural hegemony and its imperial expansion and proposes to “provincialize Europe” by giving equal voice to multiple local cultures (Chakrabarty 2000).

Post-Soviet identity politics are shifting their focus to the search for a unified “call of the ancestors” that would supplant Soviet coloniality. At the same time, quite symptomatically, the entire issue of modernity is often overlooked.

For example, S. Oushakine analyzes the postcolonial Kyrgyz cinema by comparing the “ethnographic minimalism” of auteur cinema, its “obsessive interest” in the rural and primitive, and popular costume quasi-historical dramas. He discovers that, behind many glaring differences, there are eloquent similarities. One of them is how “the director carefully removes all traces of social history from the picture”. Another one is described: “Whereas in [Aitmatov’s] novel the legend of the memoryless industry entered into a complex dialog about the relationship between tradition and modernism in late Soviet society, in the post-Soviet film this dialog (along with modernism) is removed from the film. Instead of a critique of the radical Soviet experiment, the postcolonial historical film drama about the mancourts was presented as an independent and self-sufficient narrative of victimization and external violence against (national) memory” (Oushakine 2021: 416, 420). In our opinion, it is characteristic of not only the cinema of Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia.

This example of how discourse analysis can reveal new aspects of the relationship between the post-communist and the postcolonial can be applied to other cases.

For instance, the conceptualization of the phenomenon of the “colonial boomerang” can serve as an example of the discursive turn of postcolonial studies of post-communism.

Hannah Arendt described the effect of the colonial boomerang as one of the origins of totalitarianism: the transfer of harsh management practices in the colonies to the metropolis. A. Etkind suggests the important distinction here. If the German colonial boomerang arrived from the overseas colonies, then the Russian boomerang returned from the recent serf estates to urban centers.

The phenomenon of the “gentlemen of Tashkent” (*Tashkenters*), described by Saltykov-Shchedrin in an eponymous essay (1873), could serve as the most eloquent depiction of the Russian “boomerang”.

The essay discusses how the capture of Tashkent in 1865 turned from a victory of Russian imperialism into a defeat for its metropolis.

The gentlemen of Tashkent are those officials who were sent to the outskirts of Russia because they were absolutely incapable in the center, they were silly, greedy, etc. A gentleman of Tashkent is a nightmare creeping everywhere: he beats and bribes gentlemen of St. Petersburg (the old metropolitan elite). “Tashkentism” is a combination of violence and ignorance in relation to the provinces that colonized the colonizers themselves (Saltykov-Shchedrin 1970).

Siarhei Dubaviec in his *Russian Book* (1998) describes similar processes in relation to Belarus (from tsarist times). Quoting, for example, A. Tsvikevich, who stated that even among the tsarist bureaucracy of low quality the most worthless came to Belarus “with the sole purpose of filling their pockets with money and having absolutely nothing to restrain them, this whole horde of officials brought extraordinary moral decay to the region. The only happiness for the region was the extreme greed of these pseudo-patriots for money. Only in a bribe could one find salvation from this power at that time; it was necessary to pay off in all directions in order to avoid searches, audits, scandals that left behind traces of complete devastation. Only in rare cases did socially honest people who really wanted to serve the cause and not money come to Belarus” (Dubaviec 1998: 27). A modern critic of the Russian regime, Viktor Shenderovich uses the image of the “gentlemen of Tashkent” as one of the most vivid and typical metaphors of a new Russian elite.

In this context, the problem of “skin” as a differential characteristic for triggering mechanisms of secondary oppression acquires a new degree of conventionality, openly becoming an object of social

construction. For example, Peter the Great's order for boyars to shave their beards became the most vivid example of writing down new signs of social distinction on the skin of new estates: "the Russian Empire needed a substitute for race, which proved to be even more problematic than race itself. Physical, visible, and, preferably, unwashable signs of distinction had to be found or made between the newly created estates. If estate could be written on skin, this racialized status would work for police officials, road patrols, and plantation managers" (Etkind 2011: 101).

An open question for research is how the mechanisms of double oppression of contemporary new "blacks" are constructed in the processes of internal colonization.

Here one can outline the third extension of the problematics of post-colonialism (of decolonization). Right after the collapse of the USSR, the Kremlin promoted a "new vision" of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine as the notorious "Slavic unity". At the grass-root level the "ideology" of this unity sounded as follows: the Belarusians are "the same as us, only..." more inhibited, moderate ("pomyarkovnye"), but also more reliable, even disciplined. Or, Ukrainians are "the same as us, only...", unlike Belarusians, they are easier to rise to what?, susceptible to mood changes and resistant to discipline.

Here the concept of "skin" ("interface") under the gaze of the colonial Other does not play the same role as in classical postcolonialism. The purely symbolic "skin" of language comes to the fore. Mykola Ryabchuk, for instance, believes that Ukraine "is fundamentally different from the colonized countries of Asia, Africa and America in that the difference between the dominant and subordinate groups here is linguistic and cultural, and not racial in nature. The black skin for Ukrainians has always been their 'slave' (or, as they would say in late Soviet times, 'collective farm') language; having replaced this 'black' language with a 'white' one, accepting the 'Khokhol' identity offered to them, they could make any career they wanted in the Russian and then the Soviet empire" (Riabchuk 2012: 452).

Decolonization has to do with "two languages" of the macro and micro discursive levels. The macro level embraces tasks of cultural policy – revival of the Belarusian language, change of imperial toponyms, etc. The micro level implies a less obvious but more complex discursive level.

During the Ukrainian Orange Revolution an "Open letter from twelve apolitical writers about choice and elections" against presidential candidate Yanukovych and against the Russian language in Ukraine was published. But it was stressed that the Russian language in question is "the language of pop music and Russian criminal slang" and the opposite option is "a chance for cultural diversity" (Open letter 2004).

Along the same lines, Dubaviec cites N. Lanskaya about Soviet Rus-sification: “Instead of Russian nature, language and culture, we were offered bureaucratic nature, language and culture. We, the people, turned not into Russians, but into denationalised officials” (Dubaviec 1998: 41).

In Belarus today, there is a significant difference between the Rus-sian language of protest and the Russian language of the authorities. In the former case, we deal with a rational discourse of human rights. A distinctive feature of the latter is the rustic imagery, in which animal-farm metaphors, first of all referring to pig breeding, are in the foreground. This language is used to describe diametrically opposed phenomena. Perhaps, the most famous formulation for the value uniting all Belarusians in this language sounds as “charka and shkvarka”. To designate opponents of the authorities, the propaganda discourse uses the same pork-breeding vocabulary, but with the opposite sign – “greasy scum”, “they beat with hoofs and approach like a pig” (the “pig” is a battle formation), “trans-queer-pigs”, etc. “To slaughter (like pigs)” is used both to refer to what is to be done to the enemies of the authorities and to what the enemies will do to the supporters of power.

The classic colonial strategy of “convenient naming” of the object of manipulation also works. The colonizer says: our treatment of them is completely justified due to their nature. The basic discovery in Said’s *Orientalism* remains relevant, namely, the contradiction generated by colonial discourse between the wealth inherited by the natives (be it a geopolitical position or fertile land) and their inability to manage it “in a mature way”, which requires external colonial control. Here we have the infantilization of the colonized subject – he/she, like a child, must be limited in their rights to their own property for their own benefit until a hypothetical adulthood (Said 1978).

However, the analysis of the untranslatable and deeply ambivalent layer of language – strange comparisons, stylistic idiosyncrasies, recurrent alogisms – can provide valuable insights into the deeper layer of language in which ideology is rooted. There is a significant decolonizing potential in unravelling such discursive knots.

Thus, the problems of decolonization in our region raise a new set of challenges. First of all, we are dealing with a complex cultural palimpsest. As a basic text, we have the colonization of the countryside by the city (according to the general logic of modernity). But on top of the division of the city and the countryside, other dividing lines are superimposed: ethnolinguistic divisions (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian) and the divisions of imperial and democratic forces. All these lines, to different degrees, do not coincide with each other. This postcolonial palimpsest is best represented in the films, different in all other

respects, like Igor Dobrolyubov's *White Dew* (Belye Rosy 1984) and Gytis Lukšas' *Vortex* (Duburys 2009).

On the other hand, the figure of the Russian colonizer has a specific, neurotic character (which constitutes, perhaps, the most important feature of the dialectics of internal colonization). If the Western colonizer, in Foucault's terms, is something like an effective machine of vertical rationalization (exploitation), reaching to the very bottom of society and the most remote corners of the world, the Russian imperial project is psychologized. The basis of Russian statehood, as A. Etkind believes, is a "neurotic view" of its position in the world, the fear of being colonized. And this neurotic fear is displaced from external enemies onto the internal ones: "Throughout the larger part of Russian history, a neurotic fear, which is mixed with desire, focused not only on the enemies beyond the borders but also on the space inside them" (Etkind 2011: 4–5). The Russian Empire, confronting external forces, constantly encounters not only imaginary enemies, but imperceptibly turns back to itself as a colonized colonizer. This additional neurotic filter makes it much harder to see the autonomy and otherness of the other.

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