

The Colonial Scramble and Its Aftermath: Writing Public Histories of the Postcolonies of Socialism

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[...] every mental process [...] exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase and [...] it is only from there that the process passes over into the conscious phase, just as a photographic picture begins as a negative and only becomes a picture after being turned into a positive. Not every negative, however, becomes a positive; nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one.

Sigmund Freud¹

I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction.

Frantz Fanon²

THE post-Soviet history of intellectual exchanges, borrowings and adaptations – that is, a history of attempts to appropriate (mostly ‘Western’) theories and methods – has not yet been written. By and large, the origin and the genealogy of the conceptual apparatus that shapes our public language remains unexplored. Many recent Russian-language concepts and approaches – from *gendernye issledovaniia* [gender studies] to *urbanistika* [urban studies] – have entered our everyday and academic discourses via the simple path of transliteration. While the ‘translated’ (and transliterated) nature of such a vocabulary of ideas is obvious, it is much harder to understand how these conceptual and methodological borrowings correlate with already established discursive traditions

and research orientations³. What is the survival rate of such theoretical ‘foreigners’ among the ‘natives’? What are the modes of coexistence of these intellectual ‘guests’ and their ‘hosts’? What kinds of conflicts do they generate in the process of their dialogue? And, most importantly, can we envision practices of successful ‘inter-pollination’ of heterogeneous mental assumptions and orientations that would result in sustainable intellectual ‘hybrids’, rather than in various versions of invasive epistemic colonization?

Clearly, any cross-cultural translation of a theory or an approach is impossible without significant modifications to their original meaning and explanation. The final product of the process of translation must take into account – for the purpose of its own intellectual survival – the attitudes and interests of its milieu. Often, in the process of translation, the original is not merely adapted but also fundamentally altered: there are enormous differences between ‘socialism’ envisioned by Marx and its translations produced by Stalin or Mao. The convoluted history of the origin and genealogy of postmodernism in Russia over the past 40-50 years is another example indicative of this general trend. Thanks to unknown translators and organizers of the intellectual transfer, “postmodernism as the cultural logic of *late capitalism*”⁴ became the main cultural practice in Russia of ‘disintegrating socialism’⁵.

The gradual settling of ‘public history’ in the

* Translated from Russian. Source: S. Oushakine, *Kolonial'nyi omlot i ego posledstviia: o publichnykh istoriakh postkolonii sotsializma*, in A. Zavadskii – V. Dubina (ed. by), *Vse v proshlom: Teoriia i praktika publichnoi istorii*, Moskva 2021, pp. 395-428.

¹ S. Freud, *Resistance and Repression*, in Idem, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, vol. XVI, Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)*, London 1981, p. 295.

² F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York 2008, p. 204.

³ For a discussion on the development of gender studies in Russian social sciences, see my article “*Chelovek roda on*”: *jutliary muzhestvoennosti*, in S. Ushakin, *Pole pola*, Vilnius 2007, pp. 182-195.

⁴ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham [NC] 1991.

⁵ On the history of postmodernism in literature, see: M. Lipovetskii, *Russkii postmodernizm. (Ocherki istoricheskoi poetiki)*, Ekaterinburg 1997; Idem, *Paralogii: Transformatsiia*

Russian-language context largely follows the same tradition of intellectual transfer. While studies of “the phenomenon named ‘public history’”⁶ are still rather rare in Russia, most of scholars seem to agree that as an intellectual endeavour, this field has been initiated and promoted in Russia mainly by a few universities⁷. It is also evident that the ongoing debates about public history in Russia are mostly focused on the *content* that the new approach is supposed to convey⁸. In other words, the new field and the new terminology emerge not so much as a response to the developing (or already developed) grass-root practices of ‘doing’ history in the country. Rather, they reflect a desire of professional historians to fill the ready-made concept with some local content.

There is another interesting aspect of this intellectual transfer-as-translation. While being a very recent phenomenon, the Russian-language version of public history has already taken a very distinctive direction. For example, in the US, both practical manuals and academic studies of public history consistently emphasize the ‘public’ nature of this approach, shaped by its pragmatic orientation towards the interests of a large audience located outside the borders of History as an academic field⁹. Professional historians are not dismissed, but their role is seriously modified. For example, in their *Introduction to Public History* from 2017, the authors urged readers to “see history as a practice rather than a list [of events and dates] to be memorized”, noting that when

historians draw audiences into the questions that inspire historical inquiry and invite them to participate in the act of *doing* history, suddenly history becomes vital. When people start *doing* history instead of simply learning history, they quickly realize that

history is not a tidy narrative waiting for a student to memorize¹⁰.

Within this approach, public history is viewed primarily as a vernacular history, as a ‘people’s history’ and ‘activist history’¹¹. It is precisely this ‘history of direct action’ that undergoes significant transformation in Russian-language discussions about this new field. ‘People’s’ history quickly evolves into a history ‘for’ the people, so that the public is pushed into its usual position as a learning/memorizing audience. Once again, potential (co-)authors of history are relegated to the role of passive consumers of “scientific historical knowledge” (*nauchnoe istoricheskoe znanie*) delivered to them by the professionally trained historians¹².

This careful delimitation of the agents of public history predictably leads to questions on how it will change methodology. “The establishment (*stanovlenie*) of public history” is viewed by professional historians as a new counterpart to identity politics. It has become necessary to “rethink the role of history and the historian in public space” in response to the history politics conducted by the country’s political elites¹³. Symptomatically, these concerns with the professional identity and social function of the historian marginalize broader questions about the changing nature of the audience, the possibility of dialogical cooperation with non-professional historical communities, or the types of historical knowledge generated by these communities. It is hardly surprising, then, that this incarnation of public history has had little relevance outside academia so far. In a recent review article on the state of the field in Russia, a group of authors bitterly observed: “beyond the university walls, there

(post)modernistkogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920-2000-kh godov, Moskva 2008.

⁶ See *Publichnaia istoriia: mezhdru naukoj i pamiat'iu*, “Novoe proshloe”, 2020, 2, p. 240.

⁷ See, for example, the useful overview of the rise of public history in Russia: A. Zavadskii et al., *Publichnaia istoriia i kollektivnaia pamiat'*, “Neprikosnovennyi zapas”, 2017, 2, p. 24.

⁸ For a brief overview of these attempts, see: E. Isaev, *Publichnaia istoriia v Rossii: nauchnyi i uchebnyi kontekst formirovaniia novogo uchebnogo polia*, “Vestnik Permskogo universiteta”, 2016 (33), 2, pp. 7-12.

⁹ G. W. Johnson – N. J. Stowe, *The Field of Public History: Planning the Curriculum – An Introduction*, “The Public Historian”, 1987 (9), 3, p.12.

¹⁰ C. M. Lyon – E. M. Nix – R. K. Shrum, *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging the Audience*, Lanham 2017, p. 23.

¹¹ For activist and people’s history, see respectively: D. Dean, *Introduction*; R. Conard, *Complicating Origin Stories: The Making of Public History into an Academic Field in the United States*, in D. Dean (ed. by), *A Companion to Public History*, Hoboken 2018, pp. 1, 29.

¹² L. Repina, *Nauka i obshchestvo: publichnaia istoriia v kontekste istoricheskoi kul'tury epokhi globalizatsii*, “Uchenye zapiski Kazanskogo universiteta. Seriiia ‘Gumanitarnye nauki’”, 2015 (157), 3, p. 63.

¹³ E. Isaev, *Publichnaia istoriia*, op. cit., p. 10.

are practically no communities that pay attention to this field” of historical inquiry¹⁴. By focusing on the “role of the historian”, public history has lost sight of the public itself.

This situation reflects the turbulent process of establishing a new field of historical research. To truly become public, public history needs time, resources and – most importantly! – the desire to go beyond the boundaries of history as a discipline. In this article, I will take a step in this direction. I will explore how historical themes are activated in non-historical fields. In particular, I hope to illustrate how materials from the ancient and recent past are reinterpreted and reformatted with the help of the postcolonial discourse, which is gradually taking shape in the former socialist countries. The link between public history and postcolonial thought reveals that production and circulation of public history is rarely motivated by strictly historical goals. Publicity here is a tool for organizing some historical material; it is a chance to subject this material to a process of deep recycling. The past offers a set of forms, plots, events, and connections that enable us to tell stories about the present. Various historical projects not only (re)establish links with previously inaccessible historical periods, but also they effectively change the public context in which non-professional historians situate themselves. Historical knowledge here is public in its form and postcolonial in its content.

Postcolonial studies in post-socialist countries – as in many cases of intellectual exchanges – follow the same logic of ‘borrowing as transformation’ mentioned earlier. Sergei Abashin, a leading Russian researcher of Central Asia, reminded us recently that attempts to approach the post-Soviet as post-colonial started nearly thirty years ago¹⁵. In February 1992, Algis Prazauskas, head of the division of “ethnopolitical issues” at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, authored one of the very first texts on post-Soviet postcoloniality. With the telling title *The CIS* [The

Commonwealth of Independent States] *as a Post-colonial Space*, his extensive article was published by *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, perhaps one of the most intellectually ambitious newspapers at the time. The article did not offer new methods of analysis or conceptual innovations, but it explicitly described the USSR as “a formation of the imperial type”. As the author pointed out, despite its collapse, the empire managed to leave behind “an unstable system of political, economic and other ties, some remnants of the imperial infrastructure [...] and the ‘socialist’ legacy”¹⁶.

Significantly, Prazauskas’ ‘imperial perspective’ was entirely circumscribed by the boundaries of the imperial centre, which did not seem to affect in any meaningful way other components of the “imperial-type formation”. Accordingly, the stabilization of borders was seen as the main purpose of the Commonwealth of Independent States. As the USSR was falling apart, the borders that used to be internal and administrative were quickly changing their nature and function, re-emerging as external and constituent borders of new sovereign countries. Against this background, the article presented the demands for national and territorial autonomy articulated by minorities within the new states as “potentially dangerous”, classifying them as having nothing to do with the “inalienable rights of national minorities”¹⁷. The end of the empire’s history was linked, then, with the institutional collapse of its governing apparatus. For some reason, the internal structure of the ‘components’, which in fact constituted the empire, was tacitly endowed with an immunity that protected the ‘components’ from any harmful imperial impact.

Though analytically limited, Prazauskas’ article identified several important features of the post-Soviet perception of postcoloniality. Despite the article’s explicit focus on space, the key aspect of the postcolonial condition was actually time. Postcoloniality was interpreted as a specific stage, as a period of transition from dependence to autonomy, during which new states could form the necessary attributes

¹⁴ Zavadskii *et al.*, *Publichnaia istoriia*, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁵ For more details, see S. Abashin, *Sovetskoe = kolonial’noe? (Za i protiv)*, in G. Mamedov – O. Shatalova (ed. by), *Poniatiia o sovetskom v Tsentral’noi Azii*, Bishkek 2016, pp. 28-48.

¹⁶ A. Prazauskas, *SNG kak postkolonial’noe prostranstvo*, “Nezavisimaia gazeta”, 02.02.1992.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

and institutions of sovereignty, while simultaneously learning and improving the practical skills of independent existence. Thus, the framework of development of the newly independent states reproduced the old transitological vector formulated in the process of decolonization of Africa and Asia in the 1960s: from empire to nation. Nation-state was perceived as the only form of available future¹⁸.

The emphasis on the nation-state trajectory helped to create a safe distance from the complex pre-history of the origin, formation and evolution of the current configurations of newly independent countries. It is noteworthy that in his article Prazauskas carefully avoided any explicit characterization of the status of these states. Neither in the imperial past of the Soviet Union, nor in its postcolonial present, was there a place for ‘colonies’. Instead, the term ‘colony’ was used exclusively to describe the ‘colonial possessions’ of traditional empires in Southeast Asia and Africa. To refer to the formations that actually composed the Soviet empire, Prazauskas relied either on bizarre terminological euphemisms – such as a ‘multi-tribal world’ and ‘a peculiar Eurasian panopticon of peoples’ – or on utilitarian bureaucratic clichés like ‘former Soviet republics’.

Thus, the postcolonial condition was seen primarily as a post-imperial condition. What this foregrounded, then, was not a discussion of the problems associated with the imperial/colonial forms of organization of life, which had been shaped by the decades of state socialism, but the sudden disappearance of the ‘control centre’. There were no ready-made concepts, paradigms or discursive formulas to articulate, organize, and represent the Soviet experience as a long history of colonial oppression. The colonial past and its subjects had yet to invent (retrospectively) the means of their self-expression.

For the postcolonies of socialism – as I shall call the countries that emerged after the collapse of the USSR and the socialist system as a whole – the challenges of self-representation turned out to be

more serious than might have been expected in the early 1990s. In 2001, David Chioni Moore, an American specialist in African literature, published an article in the flagship journal of the Modern Language Association, the largest association for humanities scholars in the United States. The article’s title got right to the core of the problem: “Is the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ the same as the ‘post-’ in ‘post-Soviet?’”. In the essay itself, the researcher observed – not without some surprise – that intellectuals from post-socialist countries demonstrated a strong reluctance to engage in dialogue with their postcolonial counterparts from Africa, Asia and Latin America, despite their obviously similar experiences of historical oppression:

There has been, to be sure, a growing Western scholarship on nineteenth-century Russian literary orientalism. Drawing on the colonial discourse analysis inaugurated by Said’s *Orientalism*, this work focuses on the texts, from Pushkin’s 1822 *Prisoner of the Caucasus* to Tolstoy’s 1904 *Haji Murat*, that thematize the Russo-Caucasian colonial encounter. However, when one chats with intellectuals in Vilnius or Bishkek or when one reads essays on any of the current literatures of the formerly Soviet-dominated sphere, it is difficult to find comparisons between Algeria and Ukraine, Hungary and the Philippines, or Kazakhstan and Cameroon. At times the media today treat the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the former Yugoslavia in Third World terms, but these treatments tend more to awful “Asiatic” tropes than to serious considerations of postcoloniality¹⁹.

Moore linked this distancing of postcolonies of socialism from postcolonial studies and postcolonial history of the Third World with two fundamental factors. One was a deep-rooted orientation towards a hierarchical relation of cultural values and processes. For Moore, belonging to Europe and European culture that many post-Soviet nations insisted upon unequivocally pointed to the ‘civilizational’ gap between the postcolonies of socialism, on the one hand, and the inhabitants of the postcolonial Philippines or Ghana on the other²⁰.

These claims to (original) cultural superiority were reinforced by a second tendency – the so-called ‘compensatory behavior’, which scholars of colonialism have frequently observed among groups sub-

¹⁸ For more details, see R. Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African People*, Cambridge 1960; A. Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, Princeton 2019.

¹⁹ D. Moore, *Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*, “PMLA”, 2001 (116), 1, p. 117.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

jected to prolonged oppression. Moore detected a specific manifestation of such behavior in the “exaggerated desire for authentic sources, generally a mythic set of heroic, purer ancestors who once controlled a greater zone than the people now possess”²¹.

The articles by Prazauskas and Moore provide a useful basis for a key generalization about post-Soviet postcolonialism. Despite their different contexts and standpoints, both authors identify (in different ways) the same consistent tendency: the inability (or unwillingness?) to work through the recent colonial experience is not reduced in postcolonies of socialism to the usual practice of silencing or erasing the negative past. The negative, as Freud posited, serves as the necessary beginning of the gradual emergence/appearance of a positive picture. True, the resulting picture often depicts a completely different past. The lack of a direct elaboration of the consequences of the imperial presence is actively compensated by the desire to find, to discover or to imagine a history that was unaffected by the metastases of colonial subjugation²².

This — compensatory — function stimulated by the ‘call of the ancestors’ and the ‘longing for the past’ makes clearer the social and symbolic purpose of the large scale industry mobilized for the production of history. Set in motion by the collapse of the USSR, the various wars of memory, the political mobilization of archives, the reconstruction of forgotten victories, defeats and traumas, the retrieval of deeds, heroes and victims of the past, the relentless genealogical confirmation of the ever more ancient origins of one’s own sovereignty and the increasingly significant lineage of the nation and its rulers — all this should be taken as an explicit symptom of a ‘specifically post-socialist’ condition of postcoloniality. Such an archaeology of dignity is an attempt to (un)consciously discover in the past an alternative to the working through of the experience of being a part of an empire. And the very fact that this

imaginary and pre-colonial past often presents itself as quasi-imperial demonstrates once again the profound historical complexity of the (post-)socialist ‘formation’, in which the ‘(post-)imperial’ is often indistinguishable from the ‘(post)colonial’, and vice versa.

As in many cases of intellectual transfer, there was a certain redefinition of postcolonial theory itself over the course of this slow realization of the postcolonial condition²³. If ‘colonialism’ and ‘modernity’ were the key categories of analysis for the ‘classical’ postcolonial studies²⁴, the concepts of ‘national memory’ and ‘national belonging’ (*rodstvo*) became the basic elements for the post-Soviet version of postcolonialism. Below, I will investigate how public histories of national memory (or rather, amnesia) and national belonging (or rather, orphanhood) are constructed in a postcolony of socialism. But before turning to the specifics of this historical production, let’s consider the main ideas and trajectories of postcolonial studies.

²³ For more details, see S. Chari — K. Verdery, *Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War*, “Comparative Studies in Society and History”, 2009 (51), 1, pp. 6-34; C. Snochowska-Gonzalez, *Post-Colonial Poland — On an Unavoidable Misuse*, “East European Politics and Societies”, 2012 (26), 4, pp. 708-723; S. Bill, *Seeking the Authentic: Polish Culture and the Nature of Postcolonial Theory*, “nonsite.org”, 2014, 12, <nonsite.org/article/seeking-the-authentic-polish-culture-and-the-nature-of-postcolonial-theory> (latest access: 18.12.2021); K. Stierstofer, *Fundamentalism and Postcoloniality: Beyond ‘Westoxification?’*, in C. Zabus (ed. by), *The Future of Postcolonial Studies*, New York 2015, pp. 101-114; M. Todorova, *On Public Intellectuals and Their Conceptual Frameworks*, “Slavic Review”, 2015 (74), 4, pp. 708-714; D. Pucherová — R. Gáfrík (ed. by), *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-communist Literatures and Cultures*, Leiden 2015; D. Kudaibergenova, *The Use and Abuse of Postcolonial Discourses in Post-independent Kazakhstan*, “Europe-Asia Studies”, 2016 (68), 5, pp. 917-935; E. Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies A View from the Western Borderlands*, London 2018; Idem (ed. by), *Coloniality, Nationality, Modernity: A Postcolonial View on Baltic Cultures under Soviet Rule*, London 2018. See also the special issues of the journal *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (2020, 161; 2020, 166) devoted to the theme ‘post-Soviet as postcolonial’.

²⁴ For more details, see V. Kaiwar, *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincialising Europe*, Leiden 2014, p. 104.

²¹ Ivi, p. 118.

²² For a detailed discussion of this trend, see my article S. Oushakine, *How to Grow out of Nothing: The Afterlife of National Rebirth in Postcolonial Belarus*, “Qui Parle”, 2017 (26), 2, pp. 423-490.

COLONIALISM AND ITS ANTI-, DE- AND POST-

Many scholars trace the emergence of postcolonial studies and more specifically postcolonial theory back to 1978, when Edward Said, professor at Columbia University in New York published his *Orientalism*. In his work, Said revealed the operational mechanism of the politics of representation, i.e. the set of symbolic tools and narrative devices that support the routine production of stories in the West about a ‘distinctive’ way of life in the East. Moreover, these politics of representation create a foundation in which representations of this difference become inscribed into a broader system of political, social, cultural and intellectual hierarchies. In Said’s words: “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”²⁵. As a result, the exploration of the ‘East’ by the ‘West’ is presented in the book as the production of meaningful dissimilarities and emphasized non-correspondences, as the cataloguing of disparities between the two ‘civilizations’ – both at the level of organization of life and identities, and at the level of organization of knowledge.

Clearly, the ‘East’ as a discursive museum of wonders and curiosities was only one particular manifestation of the broader Orientalist politics of representation. Concluding the book, Said summarized the results of his research as follows:

[...] I have attempted to raise a whole set of questions that are relevant in discussing the problems of human experience: How does one *represent* other cultures? What is *another* culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one’s own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the ‘other’)? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politico-historical ones? How do ideas acquire authority, ‘normality’, and even the status of ‘natural’ truth? What is the role of the intellectual?²⁶

Besides being extensive and richly detailed in its contents, *Orientalism* was also hugely impactful in shifting the analytical focus from the problems of economic, social and political exploitation

of colonies to the diverse manifestations of symbolic and epistemological violence exercised in the production of images and ideas about the East. This shift from the study of the historical and sociological problems of postcolonialism to postcoloniality as a discursive phenomenon was fundamental. Archival materials, statistical data or economic indicators that traditionally helped to reconstruct the historical situation were replaced by the analysis of the poetics and aesthetics of artistic texts. Such a change in the analytical method and selection of sources would fuel the subsequent development of postcolonial theory and become one of the main reasons for its popularity. By the early 1990s, postcolonial studies would establish itself as an integral part of a broad spectrum of so-called post-foundationalist movements formed under the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Despite the impact of Said’s book and the methodological turn that it signalled, it would be historically incorrect and theoretically wrong to associate the origin of postcolonial studies with *Orientalism* – and not only because the term ‘postcolonial’ was used only a couple of times in Said’s book. Ideas and arguments of postcolonial theory took shape in the broader historical, political and intellectual context of the struggle against imperialism and its consequences. Postcolonial studies should be seen as a logical continuation of the anti-colonial movement of the early 20th century and the process of decolonization in the middle of the last century. The political manifestos of Léopold Senghor (1906-2001), Aimé Césaire (1912-2008), Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Albert Memmi (1920-2020) and others constructed the necessary ideological and intellectual environment for the formation of the postcolonial theory²⁷.

In the 1950s-1960s, the main activity of the anti-colonial movement was to ruthlessly criticize the enduring desire to perceive the imperial presence as a ‘contact of cultures’, in which the process of

²⁷ See L. Senghor, *The Foundations of “Africanite: or “Negritude” and “Arabite”*, Paris 1967; A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York 1972; F. Fanon, *Black Skin*, op. cit.; A. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Boston 1967.

²⁵ E. Said, *Orientalism*, London 2003, p. 2.

²⁶ Ivi, pp. 325-326.

colonization was equated with the process of ‘civilizing’, carried out by imperial forces. For example, in his 1950 *Discourse on Colonialism*, the poet and founder of the Négritude movement Aimé Césaire, who grew up in Martinique, formulated a radical anti-colonial and anti-European agenda:

[...] since I have been asked to speak about colonization and civilization, let us go straight to the principal lie that is the source of all the others [...] between *colonization* and *civilization* there is an infinite distance; [...] out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up, out of all the memoranda that have been dispatched by all the ministries, there could not come a single human value. [...] Yes, it would be worthwhile to study clinically, in detail, the steps taken by Hitler and Hitlerism and to reveal to the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century that without his being aware of it, he has a Hitler inside him, that Hitler *inhabits* him, that Hitler is his *demon*, that if he rails against him, he is being inconsistent and that, at bottom, what he cannot forgive Hitler for is not *the crime* in itself, *the crime against man*, it is not *the humiliation of man as such*, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India, and the “niggers” of Africa²⁸.

Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), the first prime minister and first president of independent Ghana, translated this passionate exposure of the colonialist nature of Europe and its ‘civilization’ into political action. As he put it, colonial independence

[...] cannot come through delegations, gifts, charity, paternalism, grants, concessions, proclamations, charters or reformism, but only through the complete change of the colonial system, a united effort to unscramble the whole colonial egg of the last hundred years, a complete break of the colonial dependencies from their ‘mother countries’ and the establishment of their complete independence²⁹.

Anti-colonialism, as a determination to get rid of colonial dependence, thus merged with decolonization, that is, with the process of structural transformation that eliminates not only relations of political inequality (the colonial ‘scramble’), but also the

conditions that make such relations possible (control over the production and consumption of ‘eggs’). In the 1980s, the formation of postcolonial studies also began with a discussion of the relationship between colonialism and civilization, which eventually evolved into colonialism and modernity. The ideas of progress, development, rationality and modernization were finally linked to the ideas of racial inequality and colonial dependency. Needless to say, this replacement of ‘civilization’ with ‘modernity’ was far from being a merely stylistic choice. The terminological change deprived the ‘European’ version of civilization of its ontological monopoly and pointed to the multiplicity of developmental models. At the same time, the switch exposed the hegemonic nature of the Enlightenment modernist project, revealing again and again the basic rule: without breaking a certain number of ‘eggs’ neither modernity itself, nor its colonial scramble would be possible. As Dipesh Chakrabarti, an Indian historian at the University of Chicago, summed it up later, “[t]he European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice”³⁰.

In the postcolonial theory, this foregrounding of the inevitable connection between Europe’s ‘cultural mission’ and its imperial expansion gradually crystallized in the genre of ‘Eurocriticism’ aimed at “provincializing Europe”. This stubborn refusal to see Europe as the ontological norm, the key epistemological model, and the universal cultural centre paved the way for bringing back from the periphery those forms of organization of life, people and ideas that had been pushed out by models of development “in the European style”³¹.

For historians of the 1920s communist movement, many themes, tropes and discourse from the anti-colonial manifestos of the 1950s and 1960s might sound strikingly familiar. Indeed, ‘national’ and ‘colonial’ revolutions were perceived in the 1920s as essential to the common struggle against imperialism in the European colonies³². Correspondingly,

²⁸ A. Césaire, *Discourse*, op. cit., pp. 32, 34, 36.

²⁹ K. Nkrumah, *Towards Colonial Freedom: Africa in the Struggle Against World Imperialism*, London 1964, p. xviii. In his phrase (to unscramble the whole colonial egg of the last hundred years), Nkrumah plays on the well-known expression ‘the scramble for Africa’, which historians use to describe the partition of Africa among European colonizers after the 1855 Berlin Conference. On the ‘scramble for Africa’, see B. Harlow – M. Carter (ed. by), *Archives of Empire. Vol. 2. The Scramble for Africa*, Durham 2003.

³⁰ D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2000, p. 4.

³¹ Ivi, pp. 14–16.

³² See G. Safarov, *Kolonial’naia revoliutsiia (opyt Turkestana)*,

in their debates and decisions, members of the Communist International were consistent in dismissing the (“opportunistic”) theory of the European Social Democrats that promised “peaceful” and “automatic” decolonization: their idea that “the colonial world [wa]s being decolonized and industrialized thanks to capitalism itself” was resolutely labelled as a “harmful illusion” that would only confuse the oppressed³³.

There was, however, one fundamental difference between the anti-imperialist struggle in the 1920s and that of in the 1950s. If for the anti-colonialists of the mid-20th century the national revolution was an end in itself, for the Comintern movement of the 1920s and 1930s it was only a means, a first step in the struggle for abolishing the inequality of classes, genders and nations. Georgii Safarov (1891–1942), an important figure in the Executive Committee of the Comintern, and one of the most original theorists of anti-colonialism in the USSR wrote in 1934 in a journal with the telling title *The Revolutionary East*:

The proletariat is fighting imperialism in the name of its further struggle for the elimination of classes [...]. We could call Bolshevik only the type of work in which an average representative of the working masses of, say, India could establish — following Bolshevik propaganda and agitation — a direct and uninterrupted link between the village policeman-chowkidar and the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon. Not a single instance of violence either by Lord Willingdon or by the chowkidar of the lowest level can be passed over [...]. One must be able to focus the power of destruction, hatred and indignation of the masses on every representative of violent authorities. The experience of the Russian revolution teaches us this³⁴.

The problem with a ‘purely’ national revolution, therefore, was not that such a revolution was incapable of getting rid of the colonial system of domination imposed by (external) imperial rule. The problem, according to Safarov, was that a revolution

in the name of exclusively national liberation was not able to radically improve the position of the oppressed classes: when replacing the ‘scramble’ with ‘hard-boiled eggs’, the colonial situation changed little. As historical experience has shown — Safarov insisted — the only winner in the national revolution has always been the “native (*tuzemnaia*) bourgeoisie”³⁵.

The rhetorical and ideological orientations of these versions of anti-colonialism are useful for understanding the specificity of postcolonial studies. Like the Comintern-internationalists, proponents of the postcolonial thought in the 1980s–1990s were highly suspicious of any attempts to confine the liberation movement to the narrow framework of nationalist ideology and ethnic absolutism. But, like the anti-colonialists of the 1950s–1960s, postcolonialists were in no hurry to link the power of emancipation with representatives of any ‘revolutionary class’. The politico-theoretical appeal of the ‘revolutionary’ theory clearly faded away at the end of the 20th century: when considered against the backdrop of their intellectual and political predecessors, postcolonial studies certainly appear to be not only post-national, but also post-class and post-revolutionary.

The main cause for such political and theoretical moderation should be sought in the radical change of the geopolitical context that largely determined the direction of the anti-imperialist movement in the second half of the 20th century. The disappearance of the ‘world of socialism’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s affected not only the (former) socialist countries. Together with the ‘Second World’, the ‘Third World’ also disappeared as a meaningful category of analysis and description. Decolonization and the struggle for self-determination in the 1950s and 1970s gradually transformed into neocolonialism, and the end of the Cold War resulted in the triumph of neoliberalism³⁶. Postcolonial studies has become

Moskva 1921.

³³ *Stenograficheskiĭ otchet VI kongressa Komintern. O revoliutsionnom dvizhenii v kolonial'nykh i polukolonial'nykh stranakh*, 4, Moskva 1929, pp. 369, 517; *Rezoliutsiia “O revoliutsionnom dvizhenii v kolonial'nykh i polukolonial'nykh stranakh”*, in *Stenograficheskiĭ otchet VI kongressa Komintern*, 6, Moskva 1929, p. 142.

³⁴ G. Safarov, *Imperialisticheskoe gosudarstvo i natsional'no-kolonial'naia revoliutsiia*, “Revoliutsionnyi Vostok”, 1934, 3, p. 18.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 28. See also L. Mad'iar, *O natsional-reformizme*, “Revoliutsionnyi Vostok”, 1933, 6. For a detailed overview of these dynamics, as exemplified by the decolonization of the last century, see A. Getachew, *Worldmaking*, op. cit.

³⁶ For more details, see G. Uzoigwe, *Neocolonialism Is Dead. Long Live Neocolonialism*, “Journal of Global South Studies”, 2019 (36), 1, pp. 59–87; J.-P. Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, New York 2001; A. Getachew, *Worldmaking*, op. cit., pp. 142–183.

one of the most advanced theoretical attempts to make sense of these changes at the end of the 20th century. Essentially, its origins can be traced to the work of a group of scholars in humanities and social sciences that formed around the journal *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha (born 1923), an Indian historian then working at the University of Sussex in the UK³⁷.

The journal originally emerged as a critical project aimed against the two dominant traditions in the English-language historiography of India at the time³⁸. In a somewhat simplified summary, these two camps can be represented as follows. The school of 'imperial history' of India proceeded on the assumption that the British presence had contributed to the transformation of India into a developing unified state with a more or less effective educational system, medicine, laws and other attributes of civilization. The school of 'nationalist history' of India, on the other hand, argued that colonialism was a catastrophe that corrupted and corroded the foundations of national life.

Both traditions were united in their choice of materials and sources, viewing the history of South Asia exclusively through the prism of its elites. Their conclusions, though, were diametrically opposite. For imperial historians, the Indian elites, 'polished' in the imperial capital, were the transmitters and translators of the European version of modernity, with its idiosyncratic structure of politics, society, and state. Nationalist historians pointed to the superficiality and limitations of such 'polishing' and insisted that the elites cooperated with the colonizers solely out of necessity, while pursuing their own goals, interests, and vision of the nation-state.

Despite their different approaches, in many ways, both traditions could be seen as remarkable illustrations of Safarov's ideas. The role of the oppressed

was limited exclusively to supporting the elite – in its comprador or nationalist version. Accordingly, the spectrum of political participation fluctuated between the 'European choice' and the 'national liberation'.

It was precisely this methodological and thematic fixation of historiography on the history of the elites – or, rather, it was this methodological equation of the history of Indian society with the history of its elite groups – that the authors of *Subaltern Studies* challenged in their work by reframing the history of society as the history of its 'lower classes'. In the introduction to the first issue of the journal, Guha explained the orientation and title of the journal:

The aim of the present collection of essays [...] is to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies, and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area. The word "subaltern" in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, "of inferior rank". It will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. [...] it will be very much a part of our endeavour to make sure that our emphasis on the subaltern functions both as a measure of objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role³⁹.

In the Soviet and post-Soviet context, the heightened interest of Indian historians in the life of the subalterns looks rather familiar, perhaps even trivial. For example, the Proletkul't movement of the 1920s or the book series *The History of Factories and Plants*, initiated in the 1930s by Maxim Gorky, pursued very similar goals: the life of the (former) lower classes was presented to a larger audience, either by scholars and professional writers or by the subaltern themselves. By mastering narrative practices (and the basics of public history), the (former) subalterns thus overcame their initial illiteracy and their political unconsciousness⁴⁰. A class in itself was transformed into a class 'for' itself.

The originality of the subaltern version of post-colonial studies, however, lay not in its object of

³⁷ For an overview of subaltern studies, see G. Prakash, *Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism*, "The American Historical Review", 1994 (99), 5, pp. 1475-1490. For an anthology of subaltern studies, see V. Chaturvedi (ed. by), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London 2000.

³⁸ R. Guha, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*, "Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society", 1982, 1, pp.1-9.

³⁹ Idem, *Preface*, in Idem (ed. by), *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Vol. 1, Delhi 1982, p. vii.

⁴⁰ A good example of this kind of approach is the study authored by Jochen Hellbeck: *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*, Cambridge [MA]-London 2009.

study, but in the resulting reconceptualization of political participation and its historical representations. In his works, Guha turned upside-down the traditional Marxist assumption that associated lower classes with a lack of interest in any sustained political activity. Vladimir Lenin aptly brought the lack of consciousness and a lack of political engagement in his famous verdict: “the illiterate person stands outside of politics”⁴¹.

In the colonial situation, the political unconsciousness of the oppressed – e.g., the so-called ‘pre-political’ orientation of the peasants – was seen by Indian historians not as a drawback, but as a promise – as a structural and experiential condition for their possible autonomous existence unaffected by the imperial influence⁴². Illiterate persons in the colony stood outside the empire’s political activities. Socially and historically, the very possibility of such autonomous life and authentic identity was associated with the duality of the process of colonial oppression. Similar to the logic of the Russian populists in the second half of the 19th century, Indian postcolonial scholars also believed that unlike indigenous elites, who were actively pursued (through bribes or force) by imperial forces, the ‘lower classes’ were impacted by the imperial presence in a much less significant way. In fact, the imperial order was deeply invested in securing and conserving traditional forms of organization of life for the subalterns. The lower classes were simply not on the list of ingredients required for the colonial ‘scramble’.

Following this logic, Guha and his supporters proposed to separate analytically the politics of the elites (‘vertical’ in its form of mobilization) and the politics of subordinate groups (‘horizontal’ or ‘networked’). A broader spectrum of political participation allowed for a more nuanced awareness of those forms of activity that were previously described as spontaneous (and therefore senseless and often brutal) outbursts of the masses – be they peasant revolts, everyday hooliganism, acts of disobedience, or religious ex-

tremism.

The type of political consciousness in these acts of spontaneous, tactical confrontation, of course, differed from the consciousness associated with organized political struggle: here, consciousness was more of an everyday fixture, like common sense. The ‘spontaneous’ revolts never led to a planned armed struggle for a new political order, since the very idea of political strategy was not a part of the subaltern’s conceptual arsenal⁴³. The goal was not to build a new, alternative system, but to destroy the old one. Drawing on the discussion about the negative consciousness of the lower classes in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, Guha explained that

rural revolts were not yet equipped with a mature and positive concept of power, hence of an alternative state and a set of laws and codes of punishment to go with it. [...] the project in which the rebels had involved themselves was predominantly negative in orientation. Its purpose was not so much to reconstitute the world as to reverse it. [...] In a land where the peasant could wreck his superordinate enemy’s prestige [...] by substituting *tu* for *vous* in an argument with him, why should insurgency need killing to make its point in battle?⁴⁴.

This emphasis on the heterogeneity of the forms and types of political participation of subaltern classes expanded the limits of political consciousness: it could not be accounted for only as political rationality anymore. But there was another fundamental consequence of studying subaltern groups. It is well known that many subaltern groups, in particular peasants, very rarely documented their attitudes and expressions in writing. This does not at all mean that the subalterns had nothing to say. Rather, they remembered and recounted their experiences by different means. The result was an interrogation and reconceptualization of the idea of a historical archive as the main source of historical knowledge. Symbolic forms and genres that were usually excluded from the standard repertoire of historical inquiry – be they oral histories, rituals, myths, rumours, everyday objects and similar ‘evidence’ – became acceptable

⁴¹ V. Lenin, *Novaia ekonomicheskaia politika i zadachi politprosvetov. Doklad na II Vserossiiskom s’ezde politprosvetov*, in Idem, *Pol’noe sobranie sochinenii*, 4, Moskva 1970, p. 174.

⁴² See R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi 1983.

⁴³ For a similar model of the war of maneuver vs. the war of position, see A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume III*, New York 2007, pp. 161-169; on a somewhat similar model of ‘strategies vs. tactics’, see M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley [CA] 1984.

⁴⁴ R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, op. cit., p. 166.

historical sources⁴⁵.

New genres being included in the repertoire of acceptable, official historical resources created a need for new methods for working with them. Attempts to reconstruct consciousness in order to write the histories of the mentalities of subaltern groups were superseded by projects that studied their *practices, actions, and activities*. Histories of subjective world-views and modes of self-reflections were overshadowed by the histories of the individual and collective subjecthood which manifested itself in various acts and actions. The themes of revolutionary consciousness, of teleological expediency, and of strategic choice, which were so characteristic of the orthodox Marxist understanding of political participation, thus lost their leading role.

The increased attention to the practices of subaltern groups, however, also posed a serious problem. When writing Indian history as a history of the subjecthood of the 'lower classes', postcolonial historians came to an expected but disappointing conclusion: the subalterns' practices of resistance have rarely been successful. As Gyan Prakash, an Indian historian at Princeton University, observed, "the moment of rebellion always contained within it the moment of failure"⁴⁶. Frustration over the failed search for 'authentic' subalternity and successful resistance resulted in a major change of the theoretical paradigm. It became more and more clear that the subaltern condition, by the very fact of its existence, implied a certain systematic quality, a certain integration into the existing structures and practices of subjectivation. The initial move towards the search for a subaltern 'authenticity', which escaped the gaze of imperial attention, turned out to be a case of whimsical self-deception. The 'indirect' exploitation of Indian peasants by the indigenous bourgeoisie was in fact an integral part of the imperial economy. As Gayatri Spivak, professor of comparative literature at Columbia University frostily noted (following Marx), in her famous article *Can the Sub-*

altern Speak?, "on the level of class or group action, 'true correspondence to own being' is as artificial or social as the patronymic"⁴⁷.

Eventually, the quasi-Marxist search for agentive subalterns gave way to a post-structuralist criticism of symbolic structures and writing process. A new generation of postcolonial scholars – Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Ashis Nandy (to name just a few) – brought with them a different historical approach⁴⁸. Influenced by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan, this cohort of postcolonial scholars rejected the search for an autonomous subject of history and politics: an archaeology of practices of subordination was marginalized by an exploration of modes of symbolic production that transform subalternity into a discursive 'fact'. The desire to return the 'colonial scramble' to its original state of the egg, which Nkrumah wrote about in the 1960s, was replaced by an interest in the comparative poetics of, if you will, 'culinary recipes'.

The 1990s saw a definitive discursive shift in postcolonial studies: initial attempts to rescue subaltern groups from historical oblivion gave way to diverse forms of criticism of the discursive manifestations of subalternity. In terms of theory, postcolonial studies resembled the growing postmodern criticism of culture to such a striking degree that Kwame Anthony Appiah, a British-Ghanian philosopher at Duke University (USA) at the time, even published in 1991 an article with a provocative title: "Is the *Post-* in Postmodernism the *Post-* in Postcolonial?"⁴⁹.

Appiah's response to his own question was rather ambiguous. Indeed, postmodernism and postcolonialism shared the desire to question the universality of the ideas of progress, development and rationality that were fundamental to the practices of radical reconstruction generated by the Enlightenment. 'Post-' in both cases meant distance from global

⁴⁷ G. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in C. Nelson – L. Grossberg (ed. by), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke 1988, pp. 271–313 (285).

⁴⁸ See H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994; G. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York 1987; A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Oxford 1988.

⁴⁹ K. A. Appiah, *Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post in Postcolonial?*, "Critical Inquiry", 1991, 17, pp. 336–357.

⁴⁵ See Ivi; Idem, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge [MA] 1997.

⁴⁶ G. Prakash, *Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism*, "The American Historical Review", 1994 (99), 5, p. 1480.

projects that either completely ignored local differences or embedded them in various Orientalist binaries. Moreover, both approaches unsettled the hegemony of universal scenarios and templates through dispersive vision and deconstructivist analytics: they challenged unity with fragments, linear development with history of discontinuities, racial purity with hybridity, and normative models with their parodies.

Interest in historiography was superseded by interest in rhetoric and deconstructivist writing, and in this context of discursive ‘vegetarianism’, inquiries about ‘colonial scramble’ and the original ‘eggs’ became rather superfluous, if not misplaced. The very topography of the search for the subaltern dramatically changed its direction and structure: the subalterns were to be found neither on the margins of the dominant discourse, nor outside it, but between the discourse’s layers. What was crucial, however, was not so much subalterns themselves, but rather the traces and mechanisms of subalternity. Prakash expressed the gist of this shift well:

The actual subalterns and subalternity emerge between the folds of the discourse, in its silences and blindness, and in its over-determined pronouncements [...]. Subalternity thus emerges in the paradoxes of the functioning of power, in the functioning of the dominant discourse as it represents and domesticates peasant agency as a spontaneous and “pre-political” response to colonial violence. No longer does it appear outside the elite discourse as a separate domain, embodied in a figure endowed with a will that the dominant suppress and overpower but do not constitute. Instead, it refers to that impossible thought, figure, or action without which the dominant discourse cannot exist [...]⁵⁰.

The history of colonialism from below was evolving into a history of colonialism from within, and Prakash’s conclusion well captures the fundamental contribution made by the authors of postcolonial studies. The subjecthood of the subalterns here is a natural (rather than incidental, spontaneous, and unintelligible) product of modernization, an effect of its symbolic structures. The awareness that the social existence of groups and individuals is impossible outside of these structures is combined in postcolonial studies with an equally clear awareness that colonization/subordination have their own limits, too: colonization required the presence of the subaltern

and, simultaneously, was undermined by this presence. The more the colonized Indian resembled an English lord in his behavior and language, the more disturbing was the evident discrepancy between the (imperial) forms of his self-expression and his national (colonial) genealogy.

In this unsettling resemblance – “*almost the same, but not quite*” – Homi Bhabha, a philosopher at Harvard University, sees the main property of colonial subjectivity⁵¹. Colonial mimicry, colonial imitation induced by the imperial presence, is doomed to serve as “the sign of the inappropriate”, as “a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers”⁵².

The productive combination of the ideas of Gramsci and Foucault, Lacan and Derrida allowed scholars studying subalterns to move away from the ontological search for autonomous groups and subjects, towards the analysis of the micropolitics of power. In this case, studying the processes through which power constructs objects of its subjectivation was inextricably linked to studying subalterns’ abilities to displace, to subvert and pervert the effects and intentions of power. As Spivak put it, the main challenge was to be able to say the “‘impossible ‘no’ to a structure, which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately”⁵³.

Such an analysis of the heterogeneous postcolonial tactics of shifting strategic goals and intentions that the institutions of power try to implement continues to be at the core of contemporary postcolonial studies. Since its emergence in the 1980s on the periphery of academia, postcolonial studies as a field has evolved from a marginal movement of intellectuals into a global intellectual industry – with its own

⁵¹ H. Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, “October”, 1984, 28, pp. 125-133 (126).

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ G. Spivak, *The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies*, “New Literary History”, 1990 (21), 4, p. 794.

⁵⁰ G. Prakash, *Subaltern Studies*, op. cit., pp. 1482-1483.

academic programs, centres and publications⁵⁴.

THE POETICS OF ORPHANHOOD AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

The complex history of postcolonial studies raises the inevitable question about the applicability of this theoretical framework, set of arguments and modes of writing, to the realities of post-colonies of socialism. A discussion on the nature of Soviet coloniality requires a separate study; so does a larger question about the specifics of Soviet imperialism. Here, I focus only on a limited set of postcolonial historical projects; in my discussion below, I will follow the useful distinction in understanding postcoloniality suggested by Stuart Hall (1932-2014), the famous British cultural theorist born in Jamaica.

In the article *When Was 'The Post-Colonial'?*, Hall proposed a distinction between two versions of postcoloniality: postcoloniality understood 'chronologically', as a specific historical situation emerging after the collapse of the empire; and postcoloniality understood 'epistemologically', as a specific turning point in the process of producing knowledge⁵⁵. Clearly, while being completely independent from each other, the 'chronological postcoloniality' as a historical category of practice/experience and 'epistemological postcoloniality' as a category of description/analysis can coincide in time and space. Yet, the emphasis on specific methods of symbolic production of subaltern and postcolonial subjectivities, which has become so paramount to postcolonial studies after Said, makes it possible to determine the mechanisms of such production, regardless of the historical and geographical location.

In the final section of this article, I examine the emergence of *expressive means* that translate the new experience of independence into understandable

idioms, tropes and concepts. My materials come from the post-Soviet culture of Kyrgyzstan. By no means do I suggest that the state of independence is a default condition in the postcolonies of socialism. On the contrary, it is a practice that requires the active development of the techniques and skills of a sovereign life (along with the creation of various institutions, processes and traditions). Moreover, the state of independence requires from the postcolonies of socialism a detailed – conscious? – re-calibration of their ties with the inherited history, understood both as a discipline and as a story about the past. In this situation, public history offers a convenient framework, allowing one to appeal to the experience of the past in order to shape social relations in the present.

Public history is also important because, unlike the field of academic history in Kyrgyzstan, where postcolonial ideas present themselves quite tentatively and sporadically, historical projects aimed at the general public actively root postcolonial ideas, tropes and images in the accessible symbolic contexts of the past. Kyrgyz materials allow me to single out two separate but interrelated postcolonial discourses – the 'poetics of orphanhood' and the 'politics of belonging'. Using visual and textual materials, I will show how these two public languages of self-description are structured around the same themes of origin and relatedness. Each discourse considers these topics in its own way, but together they are intertwined in an intriguing symbolic dialogue.

Before proceeding directly to the materials, I would like to briefly review the recent imperial history and the emergence of Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz territories were incorporated into the Russian Empire quite late – during Russian colonial expansion to the south in the 1860s. During the Soviet period, the history of the region was especially interesting for its administrative and organizational volatility. After the October Revolution, the (Kara)Kyrgyz – together with other peoples of Central Asia – were united into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In the early 1920s, the peoples of Turkestan made several crucial attempts of self-description (rather

⁵⁴ See, for example, the publications *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* (<<http://journals.upress.ufl.edu/jgps/index>>) and *Postcolonial Studies* (<<https://ipcs.org.au/postcolonial-studies/>>). See also the webpage *Postcolonial Space* (<<https://postcolonial.net/>>). Latest access: 06.11.2021.

⁵⁵ Cf. S. Hall, *When Was 'The Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit*, in I. Chambers – L. Curti (ed. by), *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London 1996.

than self-determination). For instance, in January 1924, Kyrgyz delegates at the 12th Congress of Soviets of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic addressed the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks and the National Council of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR with a statement that drew the leaders' attention to the negative consequences caused by the virtual “obscurity (*neizvestnost'*)” of the Kyrgyz people. In particular, the statement demanded:

1. To recognize the Kara-Kyrgyz people as an independent nation on an equal basis with other nationalities (Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajiks, Kaisak-Kyrgyz).
2. To more widely involve representatives of the Kara-Kyrgyz workers in the party and governmental institutions⁵⁶.

In the same year, 1924, the so-called national delimitation (*razmezhevanie*) of the Turkestan Autonomous Republic took place. It was then that the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region first appeared as an administrative unit (within the RSFRS), and a little later – as an Autonomous Republic (also within the RSFSR). In 1936, the new – “Stalinist” – Constitution of the USSR transformed the Autonomous Republic into the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, within whose borders the Republic of Kyrgyzstan still exists today.

My first group of examples is visual. Almost all of them are taken from the films of the famous Kyrgyz director Aktan Abdykalykov (born 1957), who recently took a new name – Aktan Arym Kumbat. A painter by training, Arym Kumbat began making his own films in 1990. Particularly famous is his autobiographical trilogy, *Selkinchek* [The Swing, 1993, 48 min.], *Beshkempir* [The Adopted Son, 1998, 81 min.] and *Majmyl* [The Chimp, 2001, 98 min.]. To a large extent, Arym Kubat's films created a model for the development of the visual and narrative language of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Gamal Bokonbaev, one of the most insightful art critics of the republic, noted in 2007 that “the plasticity (*plastika*) of A. Abdykalykov's films significantly impacted the entire visual culture of the first fifteen years of our independence. Our face reflects this plasticity in our ‘common ex-



Fig. 1. In the state of nature: tree roots and the seashell. Screen-grabs from *Selkinchek* [The Swing, 1993]. Dir. Aktan Arym Kumbat.

pressions”⁵⁷. Bokonbaev's emphasis on plasticity, and not on cinematic language, is fundamental, and I will return to it later; for now, I will look closer at this “common expression” of the face of the nation which Bokonbaev so emphatically highlights.

Selkinchek was the first independent film by Aktan Kumbata, and the history of its production largely reflected the overall situation of the time. In the early 1990s, the studio Kyrgyzfilm, famous for the series of films based on the novels by Chingiz Ajt-

⁵⁶ As cited in: U. Chotonov, *Kyrgyzstan po puti suvereniteta (Istoriko-politologicheskii analiz)*, Bishkek 2007, p. 62.

⁵⁷ G. Bokonbaev, *Zametki prodvnutogo kinoliubitelia*, in U. Dzharparov (ed. by), *Revizija N° 1. Kyrgyzskoe kino 60/90. Stat'i, rabochii al'bom, arkhivnyy*, Bishkek 2007, p. 23.

matov, was struggling, and *Selkinchek* was funded by the Soros Foundation. As it often happens in such situations, the film became a kind of manifesto of its author. In an interview with me, Arym Kumbat explained that he made the film with virtually no script. There was no set – all materials were shot outside, in a mountain village. There were almost no professional actors involved, either: local residents took part in the filming, and the director's son plays the main character. Partly due to economic inevitability and partly to aesthetic choices, the film was a post-Soviet version of what Dziga Vertov in the 1920s called “life caught unawares”, i.e. life filmed without staging, life presented without cinematic tricks and theatrical conventions⁵⁸.

Most importantly, *Selkinchek* lacked not only script and actors – it also lacked dialogue. Instead of oral texts, it offered material textures: the semantic motion in the film was achieved with the help of carefully selected and strategically shown objects, people and landscapes. Plasticity – the conscious manipulation of physical forms and materials on the screen – became the main narrative device.

This shift from discourse to object, from word to matter is fundamental. In the movie, the importance of language in general and words or phrases in particular is marginalized by other types of expression and affect – haptic, sonic or optic. Although the characters in the film rarely speak, *Selkinchek* is not a silent movie. The absence of speech is a deliberate choice. For the story that the director seeks to show, discursive behaviour was not essential, or, to be precise, not material enough.

The plot of the film is quite simple. It is anchored by Mirlan, a boy from a small mountain village. No personal details about him or his family are ever revealed in the film; instead, we see him playing with his older friend, a silent (mute?) man of indeterminate age with visible intellectual and emotional disabilities. A board tied to two tall poplars with powerful roots extending into the ground – an improvised



Fig. 2. The flight and the swing. Screengrabs from *Selkinchek* [The Swing, 1993]. Dir. Aktan Arym Kumbat.

swing – is one of the main attractions for these two friends. Unexpectedly, we rarely see them using the swing themselves in the film; instead, we are presented with episodes where they swing Ajnura, a country girl with whom Mirlan is secretly in love.

The swing, in fact, stands at the centre of the conflict, when an unnamed seaman appears in the village, apparently returning from service in the navy. Like all the other characters in the film, the seaman hardly speaks. But his silent presence is peculiarly reified and mediated with the help of a huge sea shell that he has brought with him. The stunned villagers put the shell to their ears, trying to hear the sound of the distant sea. And it is with the help of this shell that the seaman earns the recognition (and love?) of the girl. [Fig. 1] Cleverly anticipating the seaman's plan, Mirlan tries to attract Ajnura's attention. Playing a Soviet cosmonaut (“I am Gagarin! I am Popov!”), he attempts to fly, jumping off the roof of a house with a makeshift ‘parachute’, merely a colourful tablecloth. The ‘flight’ predictably ends with a bruise, and Ajnura now swings with the seaman. [Fig. 2]

The striking dialogue between the palpable,

⁵⁸ See more about the film's history in a recent interview with the director conducted by Roman Egorov and Mumtoz Ashraifkhanova <<https://www.ccat.uz/en/video/selkinchek>> (latest access: 31.10.2021).

gnarly roots that firmly grasp the ground and the mesmerizing shell taken out of its context visually punctuate the film. Closer to the finale, Mirlan takes the shell in his hands, too – but only to expel it beyond the borders of sociality. As if reversing – rejecting? – the deep (sea) origin of the shell, the boy leaves the shell on the top of a mountain nearby. The trauma of betrayal also lives at the heart of the film: on the wall of the house, Mirlan paints a picture of the girl of his dreams – alone on the swing⁵⁹ [Fig. 3].

There are several fundamental effects of the language of materiality that I want to highlight here. One has to do with the temporality suggested by *Selkinchek*. Apart from a couple of historical details briefly mentioned in the film, the director carefully erases all traces of social history. As viewers, we find ourselves in a time that is measured not by socio-political events, but by the drama of the transition from one age stage to another. The bleaching of historical time is reinforced in another way, as well. In the film, Mirlan is not only ‘outside of politics’ (which could be explained by his age) and ‘outside of history’; he is also outside of any visible family ties and kinship relations. His friend and playmate dies in the middle of the film, and the boy spends most of his time on the screen alone, in constant dialogue with the landscape around him. Throughout the film, the child’s social ties as the protagonist are reduced to a bare minimum: biography is presented here as a biomorphic existence of man in nature. The rhythms of history are replaced by cycles of life and seasons.

Selkinchek unfolds semantically not through the plot development, but rather through the juxtaposition and sequencing of formal devices – such as a change of the camera’s angle, or a move from one object to another, or an interplay of light and shade. By minimizing the role of ‘discursive’ means of expression, the film amplified the relevance of its plastic language. It is not an exchange of words that is decisive in the film, but the co-existence of materials in the frame. Forms and rhythms are the key mechanisms to produce an effect – whether through the



Fig. 3. Dealing with the trauma: the seashell, Mirlan, and the imaginary swing. Screensgrabs from *Selkinchek* [The Swing, 1993]. Dir. Aktan Arym Kumbat.

measured movement of a swing or the slow passing of a shell from a person to person. Plucked from its native environment, a dead seashell can produce nothing but noise. However, this empty signifier is powerful enough to dramatically change the course of the film’s events. Devoid of roots and contexts, the shell acts as a shifter, which can radically alter the direction, without making any meaningful contribution of its own⁶⁰. And the foreign, deep, ‘other’

⁵⁹ The film is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7cZgSNsc_w> (latest access: 31.10.2021).

⁶⁰ For more information on shifters, see R. Jakobson, *Shiftery, glagol'nye kategorii i russkii glagol*, in S. Oushakine (ed. by), *Formal'nyj metod: antologija russkogo modernizma. T. 3: Tekhnologii*, Ekaterinburg-Moskva 2016, pp. 408-427.

origin of the shell in this case should not go unnoticed: changes always come from elsewhere.

As the main metaphor of the film, the swing provides the conceptual key to understanding its main message. Similar to the deep-rooted trees, the swing is firmly attached to the local landscape. Yet, unlike trees, it moves in space – back and forth, up and down – creating a sense of visual and spatial dynamics. Moreover, the swing movement generates the sensation of flying, while keeping the body itself relatively still. Physical limits (the ropes of the swing) act here not as an obstacle for the movement but as the condition of its possibility. Ironically, the movement is secured precisely because the swing is grounded and rooted. Or, to put it differently: rootedness and attachment exclude neither mobility nor dynamics. And the images of timeless – seemingly eternal – soil, roots, and landscape function in the film as ‘natural’ stabilizers of Mirlan’s social uprootedness.

With its ostensible ethnographism, *Selkinchek* undoubtedly reminds us of the old orientalist theses of Hegel about peoples who “have been excluded [...] from the drama of the World’s History”, about peoples whose only driving force is “the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit”, about peoples “still involved in the conditions of mere nature”⁶¹. However, in this case Hegel’s orientalism was subjected to a significant postcolonial correction. The pre-historical and pre-political story of the people who are presented in *Selkinchek* in “the conditions of mere nature” is not a reflection of their original “unhistoricity” but an artistic device deployed for clearing some conceptual and narrative room for the stories of postcolonial independence that are yet to emerge. As the film emphasizes in its finale, the act of overcoming trauma becomes possible only when the impact of the foreign shifter is cut off: the therapeutic painting of the girl on the wall of the house is enabled by the expulsion of the seashell beyond the borders of the community. Thus, the textural perception of history, the plastic art of narration without words, serves as an interesting reformulation of the old postcolonial



Fig. 4. Telling things, substances and surfaces. Screensgrabs from *Beshkempir* (1998). Dir. Aktan Arym Kumbat.

question about the expressive abilities of the subaltern. Can the subaltern speak? Yes, they can. But to convey their point, the post-Soviet subaltern might prefer other means of expression.

What kind of story do these narratives tell, then? *Selkinchek* (1993), with a lonely Mirlan growing up in the steppes and mountains of Kyrgyzstan, outlined but did not unpack the theme that became the core conflict in the next work by Arym Kubata. His *Beshkempir* (1998) inherited the basic ideological and visual approaches of the first film. At the centre of the story, there is yet another somewhat lonely teenager named Beshkempir, who falls in love with a slightly older girl⁶². As in *Selkinchek*, dialogues in *Beshkempir* are secondary to the artistic presentation of the material world of the Kyrgyz village.

⁶¹ See G. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Kitchener 2001, pp. 97, 117.

⁶² The film is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xcektLNIJI> (latest access: 31.10.2021).

Through close-ups and textural counterpoints, the director amplifies the affective and narrative possibilities of things, substances and surfaces. [Fig. 4] History in *Beshkempir* is a synonym for ethnography, too. But in this case, ethnography is not devoid of modernist touches. In fact, it points to an intriguing alternative to the Soviet canon: the films that the mobile projector brings to the village are not Soviet blockbusters, but Bollywood musicals. In the post-colonial version of Soviet history, modernity comes from the South.

What is remarkable about *Beshkempir*, however, is not only its stunning display of materiality, but also its articulation of the narrative about subjectivity, in the gradual emergence of a certain bio-historical teleology, which *Selkinchek* only hinted at. The loneliness of the boy from a mountain village finally has its narrative function. During a scuffle with one of his friends, Beshkempir learns that he is an adopted son, a foundling abandoned by his mother. The story of infantile loneliness quickly becomes one of existential rejection. The “autonomy” of the lonely boy is no longer another neo-romantic metaphor of existential solitude. Rather, it is a consequence of social uprootedness; it is a sign of social orphanhood and rejection. As I will investigate later, in situations where socio-political institutions are often reduced to networks of kinship (‘clans’ and ‘families’), the orphan is a symbol of life outside of history just as he is an index of life outside of ethnography.

There is an interesting allegory, then, that could be traced throughout the film: the enforced recognition of one’s orphanhood – with its lack of fundamental (blood) relatedness and familial belonging – is presented as a primary trauma that eventually finds a happy romantic resolution. At the end of the film, Beshkempir wins the recognition of his girlfriend, and the predominantly black-and-white film concludes with a metaphorical coda shot in colour: playing with threads against the background of a traditional patchwork carpet *kurak*, the boy and his girlfriend weave a net(work) of – new? family? kinship?– ties that bind them together [Fig. 5].

It is easy to explain away the ethnographic minimalism of Arym Kubat’s films – their obsessive

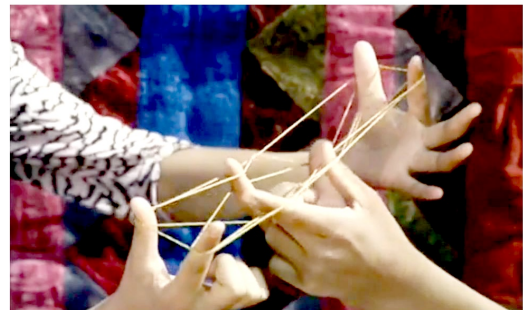


Fig. 5. Ties and networks of relatedness. Screensgrabs from *Beshkempir* (1998). Dir. Aktan Arym Kubat.

interest in the rural (if not the primitive), their narcissistic fascination with themselves – by the demands and expectations of film festivals. Their popularity and success at international film festivals suggests that the stories of orphanhood that Arym Kubat tells through things and textures are quite convincing. And yet, I think that the plastic language of these films reflects more than just the director’s artistic vocabulary (or his biography).

Filmed against the backdrop of the collapse of the USSR, these movies present stories about a slow and anguished process of realizing one’s own autonomy and separation. It is hard not to see in these films a poignant attempt to express in public the painful experience of broken family ties, unknown or unsettled identities, and the gradual building of new networks of relatedness, attachment, and belonging.

Selkinchek and *Beshkempir* significantly influ-

enced the vocabulary of imagination associated with the independence of Kyrgyzstan. The figure of the rural child has become a standard trope in the language of the visual arts of the independent country. The potential of the infantile subject position so powerfully visualized in these films did not go unnoticed among politicians, either. References to the “young Kyrgyz state”, which has yet to learn its lessons, is a popular metaphor in the political discourse of the country. Of course, it would be naïve to directly link poetic cinematic images and rhetoric of political processes. But it would be just as naïve to ignore the fact that in both domains (arts and politics), the symbolic production is based on a strikingly similar vocabulary of expressive means: multiple narratives about the present emerge as a dialogue between the metaphors of orphanhood and belonging.

I finish this essay with a few more examples that illustrate how the tropes of orphanhood and rejection are reclaimed and repurposed in public debates about national genesis and sovereignty. Like the films by Arym Kubat, the texts that I discuss below utilized historical links and associations in order to influence the public discourse now. As a bridge to the second group of my examples about the politics of kinship, I will use one more cinematic text.

Selkinchek and *Beshkempir* might have been instrumental in popularizing the theme of broken family ties, but it was Bakyt Karagulov who took it to the limits in his *Plach materi o Mankurte* [A Mother's Lament for Mankurt, 2004, 82 min.]. The film was based on a legend from Chinghiz Aitmatov's critically acclaimed novel *I dol'she veka dlitsia den'* [The Day Lasts More Than a Thousand Years, 1980]⁶³. Aitmatov himself contributed to the script, and his involvement is particularly significant: in this case, a modernist late Soviet writer took an active part in creating a cinematic costume drama that (negatively) embraced a archaic past.

Aitmatov's novel came out in 1980, in an issue of the main Soviet literary journal “Novyi Mir” [The New World] published in Moscow. In the novel, Aitmatov introduced the reader to a series of unex-

pected and novel reflections on Soviet modernization in Central Asia: the Baikonur cosmodrome (the main Soviet launch site for space ships) co-existed there with nomadic camel-breeders. Steeped in the language “of mere nature” (as Hegel would have it), various metaphors and symbols of tradition cast serious doubt on the radicalism of Soviet modernity.

The legend about the *mankurts* – people whose memory was completely and forcefully obliterated – was one of the free-standing stories included in the novel. It offered a narrative about external enemies and terror that focused on the Chinese tribes Juan-Juan. In the 10th century, they created an effective biopolitical industry that used the locals to manufacture a powerful symbol of their own subjugation and intimidation. The Juan-Juan would capture ‘native’ (presumably Kyrgyz) men and then wipe their memory: humans would be transformed into a bundle of muscular energy, into a walking sign of madness caused by amnesia.

To achieve the state of complete amnesia, the victim was exposed to a sophisticated type of torture: raw camel skin would be cut into pieces and then tied tightly around the victim's shaved head. The victim was then left in the steppe under the burning sun. If he did not die of hunger and thirst, he could die from the agony provoked by the shrinking skin that squeezed the skull. If he managed to suffer through this stage, there was one more to go through: the victim's hair would slowly grow through the skin, transforming the instrument of torture into a part of his body. The survivors were known as *mankurts*: people deprived of kinship ties, memory, language and past. With time, *mankurts* would become inseparable from the camel skin, ultimately embodying the tool of their own deprivation. This torture device, having become part of its victim, evolves into a structure of oppression without which life would be impossible.

In the original novel, the legend about this torturous medieval industry of amnesia presented an uneasy dialogue on the relationship between tradition and modernity in late Soviet society. In the post-Soviet film, this dialogue was left outside the frame (together with modernity). Steering clear of any di-

⁶³ For an English translation, see C. Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, Bloomington 1983.



Fig. 6. Outside of history: uprooted tumbleweed and lost son. Screengrabs from *Plach materi o Mankurte* [A Mother's Lament for Mankurt, 2004]. Dir. Bakyt Karagulov.

rect analysis and critique of the Soviet experiment, the postcolonial historical drama about *mankurt* presented instead a self-contained story about victimization and external violence against (national) memory. The idea of sacrifice has been reinforced and amplified by the family context, which effectively reduced the socio-political conflict to the depiction of severed family relations: to the mother's lament about a *mankurt*.

However, it would be not fair to say that there are no dialogical ambitions and intertextual references in *A Mother's Lament for Mankurt*. In many ways, the film provided an antithesis, an inversion of the stories told by Arym Kubat's ethnographic cinema. An unnamed and invisible mother, who abandoned her son (in *Beshkempir*), was replaced in Karagulov's film by the heroic mother, who goes to rescue her adult son who has been taken prisoner by the Juan-Juan. Her journey results in a tragedy, though: after a long and exhausting trip, the mother finds her son-turned-mankurt in the desert. Trying to bring back his memory, she begs him to recall his name and the name of his father. In response, in a fit of

madness (and under the influence of his Chinese masters), the son kills his mother, and the mother's lament seamlessly evolves into a song of mourning for her own death and her lost son⁶⁴ [Fig. 6].

Shot against the background of camel herds and symbolically marked by the presence of uprooted tumbleweed grass, this verbose and poorly staged costume drama did not have much success at the box office or at festivals. But it revived debates about Kyrgyz origin, memory and identity in the republic. For example, in 2006 a Kyrgyz writer has explained the relevance of *mankurtism* as follows:

Mankurtism is the cult of spiritual slavery; it perceives this very slavery as the normal life. [...] *Mankurtism* is a spiritual AIDS. In my beloved country many are now infected by this terrible disease; to the greatest shame, many among those who are infected are my fellow writers who have chosen the most vile form of slavery – the slavery of the soul and the spirit. In the past, the slaves celebrated the beys, then Stalin and the party; now they celebrate the unbearably impeccable rulers of our times⁶⁵.

Mankurtism here is used as a blanket metaphor, as a universal diagnosis of any problematic case in the nation's past and present. Responding to this disastrous vision of history, in many vernacular projects, authors made an effort to create a 'dignified biography' of the new nation and its representatives. This genealogical re-mapping of the past has led to a striking proliferation of public and academic discourses on clans, tribes, and kinship. During the first two post-Soviet decades, many scholars in and outside Kyrgyzstan pointed out that in the absence of developed political parties, family ties were frequently deployed as key tools for mobilizing economic and human resources, as well as for ensuring the circulation of elites. In this literature, the clan functions as a "collective identity network"⁶⁶, a mechanism for detecting 'friends' and designating 'others'. It was as if this public reanimation of the rhetoric and categories of kinship decided to transform post-Soviet politics in the republic into an illustration for Claude Levi-Strauss' research on elementary kinship structures. There was a crucial dif-

⁶⁴ The film is available here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOdClyLchPc>> (latest access: 31.10.2021).

⁶⁵ T. Ibragimov, *Ob Aimatove*, "Kurak", 2006, 3, p. 144.

⁶⁶ See, for example, K. Collins, *The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia*, "Comparative Politics", 2003 (35), 2, p. 173.



Fig. 7. Human faces of state sovereignty: the front cover of the book and a page with the author's family sketches. From: U. Chotonov, *Kyrgyzstan po puti suvereniteta (Istoriko-politologicheskii analiz)*, Bishkek, 2007.

ference, though. In Levi-Strauss' account, women – as the ultimate object of exchange between different clans and tribes – embodied the function of cementing relations between different kinship networks and ensured their borders⁶⁷. Apparently, after socialism, it is the circulation of official positions and appointments (*dolzhnosti*) – among different kinship networks – that performs the same function of consolidation and separation.

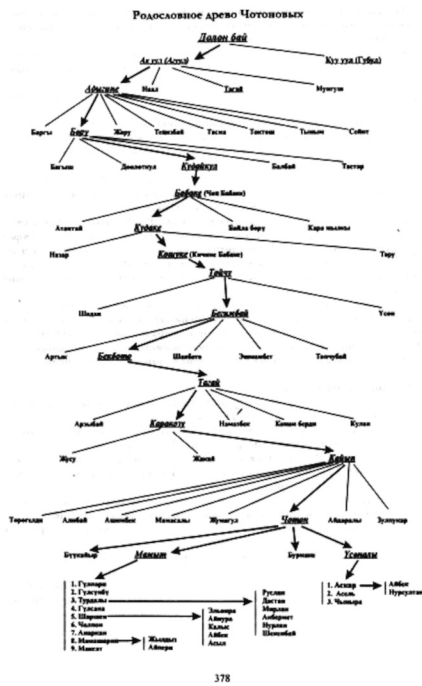
Of course, the restoration of the organizational logic of kinship for ordering political and social relations is hardly remarkable. The point is not that the political mobilization of 'clans' and 'family ties' are an integral part of the national tradition, as some scholars have suggested. In this respect Kyrgyzstan is not unique, and similar trends can be easily found in other post-Soviet states⁶⁸. Rather, the rhetoric of kinship provides an effective discursive

tool capable of explaining, structuring and justifying the social fragmentation and the rupture of kinship ties after socialism. Narratives of (blood) relatedness offer a valuable interpretive framework in which the desire to highlight particularities ('clan') does not pre-empt the claim to some kind of universality ('nation-state'). It is also significant that the activation of genealogical rhetoric in many respects makes it possible to forge a biography outside and beyond the limits of the Soviet narrative. Genealogy, in other words, allows individuals and groups to inscribe themselves in the newly constructed history of the country: it works as a vernacular device for preserving sovereignty on the level of the individual. With its detailed schematization and segmentation of the past, kinship rhetoric effectively 'texturizes' the landscape of history, which until recently presented only a smooth surface of a collective path to the collective future.

Sometimes this desire to represent and legitimize oneself through one's ancestors takes on surprising forms. For example, the very traditional monograph on the history of Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty, published

⁶⁷ Cf. C. Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston 1969.

⁶⁸ For a detailed overview of the late Soviet interest in the logic of kinship, see my article *Mesto-imeni-ia: sem'ia kak sposob organizatsii zhizni*, in S. Oushakine (ed. by), *Semeinye uzy: Modeli dlia sborki, T. 1*, Moskva 2004, pp. 7–54.



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Fig. 8. Content Matters of two kinds: the page with the author’s genealogical tree placed next to the book’s table of contents. From: U. Chotonov, *Kyrgyzstan po puti suvereniteta (Istoriko-politologicheskii analiz)*, Bishkek, 2007.

in 2007 by the political scientist Usenali Chotonov, ends with an unexpected appendix. In the folds of the academic discourse, he inserted not only a personal portrait and a short autobiographical sketch, but also biographies and portraits of his parents [Fig. 7]. Additionally, the reference apparatus of the book included – along with a standard list of bibliographic sources – a detailed genealogical diagram of the author’s origin, as if reenforcing the scholar’s academic credentials with records of his biosocial embeddedness and belonging. Like the poplars in *Selkinchek*, the history of the country and the biography of the researcher were rooted in the soil of the past, sprouting in the form of “family trees” [Fig. 8].

As in any genealogy, the most interesting aspect here has little to do with family ties and kinship continuity as such. What is crucial is the filtering effect that the ramified genealogical tree (created retrospectively) performs by sifting through the past in order to substantiate the present. For example, Chotonov’s genealogy of the nation enables him to build a completely different history of the national sovereignty of the Kyrgyz. In his book, the political scientist puts together a historical narrative in

which Kyrgyz tribes have been fighting non-stop for their national self-determination since 201 BC. Projected into the past, the genealogy of ‘postcolonial sovereignty’ becomes a way of constructing one’s own pre-history, a way of confirming one’s own historical inevitability and purposefulness. As a result, the period of the so-called Kyrgyz Grand Rule (*Kyrgyzskoe Velikoderzhavie*) from the 8th to the 12th century emerges as a political paradigm for the ‘modern’ republic.

The history of colonialism is interpreted in a similarly selective way. As Cholponov writes, the “Yeni-sei Kyrgyz” who lived in the Minusinsk Hollow from the 3rd century BC to the 13th century AD, “voluntarily submitted themselves to Genghis Khan in 1207 in order to preserve their statehood”. They similarly “accepted subjection (*priniali poddanstvo*) to the Russian Empire in order to preserve themselves”⁶⁹ six centuries later. Colonial dependence, thus, reappears not so much as a product of coercion and cruel imperial policy, but as a tactical decision motivated by the desire to preserve the subjectivity of the nation and/or state. According to this version of

⁶⁹ U. Chotonov, *Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit., pp. 54, 58.

history, imperial oppression plays a role in a state's journey towards national sovereignty without necessarily occluding it. Like the swing in *Selkinchek*, in this state of attachment – a situation of subordination – the subaltern still has some freedom of movement and agency.

This kind of imaginary history of statehood becomes especially crucial, since neither a common language nor material culture can be presented as direct historical evidence of national sovereignty. In a 2012 interview, Almazbek Atambaev, the president of the country at the time, painted a grand picture of the past politics of his people and their unfortunate present:

The Kyrgyz once created the Khanate, which is 1170 years old today. This Khanate began from Baikal, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk and reached Tibet, stretching through Central Asia. Having once owned such a large territory, today the Kyrgyz are forced to live on a small piece of land [...]. [...] there are two setbacks in Kyrgyzstan: corruption and *mankurtism*. We have forgotten our history [...]. We need to remember that we were in charge of the territory [*vozglavliali territoriiu*] spanning from Siberia to the Caspian Sea. Not only were we united, but also we brought together other peoples. [...] The Kyrgyz have forgotten who they are. From the *aqsaqals* and politicians to the youngest people, everyone is corrupted. They cannot get along with one another, and they keep splitting: into northern and southern ones, into *ichkiliks* and *arkalyks* [...] they even divide themselves by villages. All these troubles come from *mankurtism*. [...] I want to create a commission on history composed of scholars; I will ask them to explore different directions. I instructed the government to solemnly celebrate the 1170th anniversary of the Khanate. To achieve a bright future, the Kyrgyz must know their history [...]. Today, we think that we have always lived on this small land, among the mountains. This is not so, the Kyrgyz were not like that⁷⁰ [Fig. 9].

It is easy to provide a long list of similar fantasies in which empires of the past spread their control all over the continent. But I will finish this article with only one, in which history, genealogy and eurocentrism come together.

In her book on the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz people, the Bishkek musicologist Chynar Umetalieva-Baialieva suggests an unconventional interpretation of the origin of the nation. Starting from her colleagues' assumptions that “undoubtedly” the “Ky-

rgyz are one of the most ancient modern peoples (*odni iz samykh drevnikh sovremennykh narodov*) in Central Asia” (despite all the confusion regarding the Kyrgyz's ethnogenesis)⁷¹, Umetalieva-Baialieva significantly backdates the emergence of this nation. Usually, historians begin accounting for this “ancient modern people” from 201 BC, linking this date with the first available mention of the Kyrgyz. Relying on the studies of the “proto-Kyrgyz” that were conducted in the last three decades, Umetalieva-Baialieva cites a series of evidence for what she calls “the genetic link between the Sumerians and the ancient Kyrgyz”⁷². Without dwelling too much on the striking similarities that Umetalieva-Baialieva found between the epic tales on Gilgamesh and the ones on Manas, or between the religious rites of the two peoples, I will quote here her conclusion, which gestures to the main reason for this genealogical exploration. As the scholar frames it, “according to anthropological data, at the core of the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz of the Tien Shan lies a population of European race [...]” with “red hair, blue eyes and ruddy cheeks”⁷³.

As this article has explored, the situation of post-colonial independence in which the republic found itself in 1991 contributed to the emergence of a vocabulary of expressive means that helped to publicly articulate and symbolically stabilize the new condition. Poetic stories about “a small, tender but funny, boy who lives (suffers, falls in love, grows up) high up in the mountains, in a remote village”⁷⁴ over time became a formal search for genetic and historical connections that could be used as the basis for alternative historical matrices and political plots. Formal similarities and oppositions were presented as evidence, giving shape, color, and motion to this history. It is a history that resembles the traditional *kurak* rug, which can be disassembled and reassembled in

⁷⁰ A. Atambaev, “*Kyrgyzy vladeli zemliami ot Sibiri do Kaspiia*”. *Inter'iu ot 2 marta 2012 goda*, <http://www.gezitter.org/politic/9372_almazbek_atambaev_kyrgyzyzi_vladeli_zemlyami_ot_sibiri_do_kaspiya> (latest access: 31.10.2021). Source of the map: <https://kghistory.akipress.org/unews/un_post:1422>.

⁷¹ Ch. Umetalieva-Baialieva, *Etnogenez kyrgyzov: muzykovedcheskii aspekt. Istoriko-kul'turnoe issledovanie*, Bishkek 2008, p. 16.

⁷² Ivi, p. 28.

⁷³ Ivi, pp. 42, 43.

⁷⁴ G. Bokonbaev, *Zametki*, op. cit., p. 24.



Fig. 9. Mapping The Grand Rule of the Kyrgyz: “We need to remember that we were in charge of the territory spanning from Siberia to the Caspian Sea”. Source of the map: <https://kghistory.akipress.org/unews/un_post:1422>.

any moment, in an impressive variety of ways.

What these narratives have in common is that they are all largely interwoven with the same experience of subalternity and desire to overcome it, which in the West formed the basis of postcolonial studies on the East at the end of the 20th century. But in spite of these similarities, post-Soviet postcoloniality also shows a number of unique features. The post-Soviet subalterns have little difficulty expressing themselves, although their self-expression does not necessarily take the verbal form. Texture is often more effective than text.

Personally, however, I am more interested in another unique feature of historical projects that emerge within the framework of post-Soviet postcoloniality. When the national imagination of the postcolony of socialism does express itself in writing, its narratives are often colonized by the fantasies about the great Khanates stretching from Siberia to the Caspian Sea or about the blue-eyed Caucasian Kyrgyz conquering the endless space from the Middle East to the Minusinsk Hollow. In such cases, the postcolonial appears almost the same (*but not quite*) as the imperial, a reminder of the painfully familiar ‘colonial scramble’. It is as though postcolonialists, to recall Fanon, decided to turn themselves into voluntary prisoners of History.

Was it worth, then, to start speaking or, rather, ‘doing’ history in these ways? I think, it was. The thematic predictability of the histories discussed in this essay should not obscure the main point. The public articulations of stories about enforced amnesia, orphanhood and belonging enabled the emergence of new authors, with new methods of doing history. Political scientists are engaging in genealogical research; musicologists are talking about genetics; arthouse directors are making ethnographic films. Radically undermining the monopoly of professional historians on working with the past, these projects constantly blur the line between history and life. Narrative traps and epistemological dead-ends along this path are, of course, inevitable. But the very public dimension of the production and circulation of postcolonial stories give hope that these traps and dead-ends are nothing more than growing pains, and that the “prisoners of History” will eventually become its true authors.

◇ *The Colonial Scramble and Its Aftermath: Writing Public Histories of the Postcolonies of Socialism* ◇

Serguei Alex. Oushakine

Abstract

Using a brief summary of the development of postcolonial studies and anticolonial thought as its main backdrop, the essay explores how postcolonial imagination finds its representations in various public history projects in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. By linking public history and postcolonial thought, the essay demonstrates that the production of historical narratives from below, by non-professional historians, is rarely motivated by strictly historical goals. Indeed, publicity here is a tool for subjecting historical materials to a process of deep recycling. The past is mined for forms, plots, events, and connections, which, then, enable ‘public historians’ to create and circulate stories about the present. As a result, various historical projects not only (re)establish links with previously inaccessible historical periods, but also they effectively change the public context in which non-professional historians situate themselves. Historical knowledge here is public in its form and postcolonial in its content. Relying on Kyrgyz cinema and scholarly publications, the essay identifies two separate but interrelated postcolonial discourses – the ‘poetics of orphanhood’ and the ‘politics of belonging’. It argues that these two public languages of self-description are structured around the same themes of origin and relatedness. Each discourse problematizes these topics in its own way, but both discourses are intertwined in an intriguing symbolic dialogue.

Keywords

Postcolonial Studies, Historical Narratives, Public History, Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz Cinema.

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