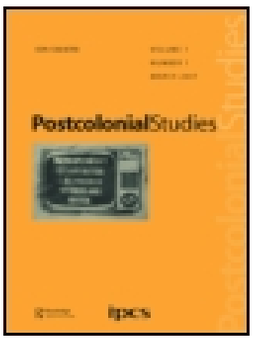

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Post-Soviet subalternity and the dialectic of race: reflections on Tamar Koplatadze's article

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ABSTRACT

In her timely and important contribution ('Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', *Postcolonial Studies* 22(4), 2019), Tamar Koplatadze identifies a number of blind spots of postcolonial scholarship focused on the post-Soviet space. This comment explores some of the implications of Koplatadze's critique of such concepts as subaltern empire and internal colonisation to highlight the importance of applying the master–slave opposition in a dialectical manner. Turning to Frantz Fanon's interpretation of racial difference, I emphasise how in his thinking about anti-colonial struggle, a radical affirmation of blackness dialectically transforms into a universalist emancipatory platform. An engagement with Fanon suggests that the border between the subaltern and oppressors must always be situated in the local context as well as in the global hierarchical order, in which the low-level agents of empire are often also exploited and disenfranchised. It is wrong to link the subaltern position with any particular identity, since any particularity can be imposed on other particularities, thus becoming oppressive. Against this background, defining Russia as a subaltern empire is a way of grasping the dialectic of multi-layered global hegemony; it must be read as a call for solidarity among subaltern groups rather than as an attempt to exonerate the Russian state.

KEYWORDS

Post-Soviet space; race; dialectic; subalternity; emancipation

Introduction

In her timely re-assessment of the relevance of the postcolonial paradigm for the post-Soviet region, Tamar Koplatadze highlights the continuing lack of attention among post-colonial scholars to the former colonial subjects of the Russian empire, especially in its 'southern sphere'.[1] Indeed, existing studies tend to view these regions' colonial experiences from the perspective of the centre, by looking at the imperial structures of governance and discourses, and leaving the local voices talk to themselves.

While I fully share Koplatadze's disappointment with this state of affairs, my take on its root causes is different. Koplatadze seems to hold the approaches emphasising Russia's semi-peripheral, subordinate position in the world-system partly responsible for the silencing of the colonised. In her view, these works (including my own) place Russia 'in a subaltern position without paying attention to the country's racial

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politics'. This, in turn, 'shifts the focus away from the ex-Soviet republics, the voices of whose peoples are unheard or slow in emerging, and erases, rather than critically or strategically blurs, the distinction between master/slave and coloniser/colonised'.[2] Consequently, the task is 'to transcend the theoretical discourse on Russia as a victimised internal colony and to pay attention to the perspective of the societies in the southern sphere of the ex-Soviet bloc'.[3]

As I see it, the silencing of the peripheral voices has much more to do with the hierarchical structure of global knowledge production than with highlighting Russia's subaltern position by any particular group of scholars. Within this structure, Russia is an established object of research, Ukraine and the Baltics are approaching this status, whereas anyone writing about South Caucasus or Central Asia is bound to be challenged by academic geography, especially at the early stages of their career. This hierarchy has been shaped by an overdetermined combination of disparate social forces, which certainly deserves some reflection from a postcolonial perspective.[4]

Regardless of whether this explanation is correct, it still leaves open the question of whether writing on Russia as a subaltern somehow 'shifts the focus' away from its colonies. This would certainly be the case if one were to present the positions of the coloniser and the colonised as fixed and mutually exclusive, foreclosing the possibility that a coloniser could simultaneously be colonised by another, even more powerful empire. This perception is what motivates some scholars to insist on reserving the position of the colonised for the non-Russian subjects of the empire (whatever 'non-Russian' means in various contexts).[5]

Assuming that Koplatadze does not intend to promote such a rigid binary ontology, let me turn to her observation that the 'endeavour of incorporating Russian imperial experience into postcolonial studies is jeopardised … by what Madina Tlostanova identifies as the general lack of critical preoccupation with racial politics in the Russo-Soviet empires'.[6] I would agree that Russian imperial experience, taken as a whole, defies such a straightforward incorporation. On the contrary, what is fascinating about the Russian case is that it forces postcolonial studies to move beyond its original realm and, in the process, to rethink its foundational categories – race and culture. As soon as a postcolonial optic is applied to the Russian imperial domain, one immediately faces the need to reconceptualise the difference between the coloniser and the colonised, which, in turn, requires a new approach to locating the subject of decolonisation. What is at stake are the core points of departure of postcolonial theorising, both ontological and normative.

I must acknowledge that my own normative perspective on emancipatory politics is a universalist one, and I am particularly sceptical about the possibility of basing social critique on something as fluid as cultural difference, whose articulation entirely depends on the operation of hegemony.[7] Racial difference, on the contrary, cannot be fully subsumed under the generic concepts of inequality and exploitation. However, as long as we want to preserve the emancipatory impulse inherent in the postcolonial paradigm, we must not shy away from questioning the meaning of racial difference in each specific historical context we have to work in and with. In what follows, I suggest going back to Frantz Fanon in an attempt to recover the dialectic of race that might be conducive to a view of subalternity as contingent and situated.

Situating colonial difference

Unlike race, cultural difference is a matter of perspective. In her critical re-evaluation of Alexander Etkind's internal colonisation argument, Koplatadze asserts that '[t]he Russian elites and the Russian *narod* … were both Russian; in other words, both the coloniser and the colonised were of the same ethnicity, culture and language'.[8] This statement implicitly casts doubt on the near consensus among historians about the enormous cultural gap between the elites and the ordinary Russians during most of the imperial period.[9] It also sets aside such important questions as the applicability of the concept of ethnicity to a large part of the Russian empire, and the degree to which in the post-Soviet space the very core of this concept has been contaminated by the Soviet official concept of *natsional'nost'* and related authoritarian discriminatory practices.[10]

I do admit, however, that the difference between the Russian nobility and Russian peasants might lose its constitutive significance if it is viewed from the southern periphery, and especially through the prism of the memories of the Soviet past. Many subjects of *external* colonisation by the Russian and Soviet empires were victimised on the basis of race, and it is indeed impossible to ignore the qualitative difference between the oppressive regimes in the core and in the margins, especially when it comes to the twentieth century.

In other words, Koplatadze is right that the question of race must be addressed head on. As with any conceptualisation of the master–slave opposition from a postcolonial perspective, deploying it in the post-Soviet context implies the need to relate to Fanon's bold proclamation of black subjectivity, materially rooted in the lived experience of racial oppression. In the eyes of white people, a black man is located in 'a zone of nonbeing': he has no Hegelian 'being for others', 'no ontological resistance'.[11] Fanon diagnoses 'a sub-ontological realm *below* Being', which precludes any meaningful relationship, even a discriminatory one.[12] Hence, the first step towards emancipation consists in the black man violently asserting his existence; this also leads Fanon to the uncompromising advocacy of anti-colonial violence in the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*.[13]

To repeat, there is no denial that racial difference did play a constitutive role in Russian and Soviet colonialism, especially in 'the southern sphere'. And yet any suggestion that the colonial subjects in the Russian domain experienced blackness with the same unbearable material intensity as conveyed by Fanon is likely to be contested by many. Firstly, some of the colonised were as white as the Russians themselves: in fact, given the prevalence of the Eurocentric self-denial in the Russian culture, some slaves were culturally constructed as 'whiter' than their masters.[14] Secondly, while some groups, especially of Asian descent, might be described as relegated to the 'zone of nonbeing' by the Russian empire, the latter is still remarkable for maintaining complex legal and semi-legal hierarchies in which every people was put on the map and endowed with a distinct set of rights and duties.[15] The Soviet Union was even more distinct: despite omnipresent discrimination, one can hardly say that it did not recognise its colonial subjects *qua* subjects, by assigning each nationality a place in the structure of the Soviet super-federation.[16]

The third problem with using race as an ontological category in the analysis of the (former) Russian imperial domain is that it might be challenged as illegitimate appropriation, a disrespectful attempt to equate any form of colonial oppression with the unfathomable dehumanisation involved in slavery and extinction. I am in no position to judge the merit of this argument, but it is obvious that the clear line between blackness and

whiteness gets blurred in the Eurasian space. On the one hand, as Nancy Condee aptly notes, the former western periphery of the Soviet empire often insists on having been occupied rather than colonised – but is it 'our unacknowledged racialisation of language that drives this distinction? … How white must one be to be occupied?'.[17] On the other hand, the deportations of 'white' Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians in the 1940s were an action of a colonial empire, seeking to secure its western periphery and to supply nearly-slave labour to the lands that it saw as empty, or populated by some uncivilised non-whites. Similarly, it is impossible to ignore the characteristically colonial elements of the contemporary Russian reality: 'extractivist attitude to nature, waste treatment schemes, problems of post-Soviet migration, domination of Russian language, politico-economic internal centralisation and imperial foreign policy, the rise of nationalism and patriarchal "retraditionalisation"'.[18]

From singularity to universalism

Moreover, if one looks closely enough, one might discern something akin to Fanon's living experience as a black man in the ways in which white people from the post-Soviet space have to navigate the uneven terrain of today's 'global' world: '"Where are you from?" – "Ukraine." – "Which part?" – "What do you mean 'which part'?! My feet, my legs, my nose – these all come from Ukraine. And the rest of me, too!"'.[19] Olga Burlyuk's frustration with repeatedly having to deal with the objectification involved in the refusal to see her for what she is, by trying to determine her identity via the colonial East–West geography, eventually bursts out in an act of verbal violence not unlike the one famously committed by Fanon as his initial emancipatory move.[20] She opens her guest lecture at the Free University of Brussels by confronting her audience with their own preconceptions:

> I am a young Ukrainian woman talking about root causes of the war in Ukraine. I know you will dismiss everything I say in the next two hours on accounts of age, nationality and gender. Who am I as a young person to talk about tectonic shifts in international relations? Who am I as a Ukrainian to know and say anything 'objective' and 'authoritative' about Ukraine? Who am I as a woman to talk about war?[21]

Burlyuk's honest autoethnography is revealing in many respects. Most immediately, it brings forward the gender dimension of postcolonial matrixes, thus reminding us that in Hegel's dialectic, '[c]ontradiction is a more profound determination than identity': 'there are no isolated positive/negative oppositions, since each term is itself derived from another opposition'.[22] The racially or culturally 'coloured' being of the colonised collapses into a singularity only at the moment of the violent declaration of its existence, confronting the master. At all other moments, the black identity is split within itself along class, gender and other lines, and it is crucial not to stop short of exposing 'the patriarchal collaboration between colonizer and colonized'.[23] It is hardly a coincidence that Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's destiny as one of otherness, objectification and alienation from oneself displays so many parallels with Fanon's enunciation of the lived experience of blackness.[24]

In any colonial setting, it is the imperial centre that is ultimately responsible for maintaining the structure of oppression. However, there is a danger of abandoning dialectics by attributing the entire spectrum of oppressive practices to the imperial centre, by

postulating identity above any contradiction. This has a disturbing impact on politics, which comes to be defined in exclusively national terms: solidarity has always to be constructed on a national platform first, before one could unite around any other values – feminist, anti-capitalist, environmental or any other. Besides, as Vika Kravtsova warns, summarising the anxiety of her Central Asian respondents, 'there is a danger of reducing the critique to the talk exclusively about the violence committed in the past by "someone else", while denying the violence committed today'.[25]

The urgent temporality of 'today' subverts spatial divisions. Burlyuk's account is so telling also because most of her struggles with colonial and patriarchal attitudes occur in Western Europe, in the supposedly progressive world of academics, entrepreneurs and civil society activists. Some of the stories reflect the self-orientalising attitudes of Ukrainians themselves, while the presence of the Russian coloniser is either marginal or indirect.[26] Her notes leave an unmistaken impression of a single colonial matrix, in which the subaltern remains speechless, her place always already assigned to her, either in Brussels, in Moscow, or on her home turf in Kiev. It is also worth noting that all of us – Burlyuk, Koplatadze and I – had to acquire operational knowledge of the language of Anglo-Saxon academe to be able to get our concerns across.

These observations bring us back to Fanon, and in particular to the brilliant analysis of *The Wretched* by George Ciccariello-Maher. When the violent assertion of black being extends the moment of pure antagonism into the temporality of anti-colonial revolt, it is bound to face the fundamentally political question of establishing the decolonial nation. Here, in a Hegelian-Nietzschean move, the essence of blackness has to encounter its own negativity: 'essence is not being's truth or other, but "the movement of being itself"'.[27] The decolonial nation emerges in a mythical fashion, as a fragmented unity of individual peasant uprisings. It is 'a project in becoming, … its authority could surge from ostensibly isolated hilltops', and therefore 'it is not a substance at all but a contagious collective will and practice. It aspires to unity, … but … it remains to be seen *what* precisely is being unified, according to what parameters, and *for how long*'.[28]

Furthermore, as the decolonial nation gets established in a sovereign state, it still faces the danger of being harnessed 'into the neocolonial continuity of the capitalist world-system'.[29] Antagonistic anti-colonial nationalism is appropriated by the national bourgeoisie, which performs its historical function as the agent of the global core in perpetuating the mechanisms of colonial extraction. 'The people then realize that national independence brings to light multiple realities which in some cases are divergent and conflicting', Fanon writes. This realisation 'leads the people to replace an overall undifferentiated nationalism with a social and economic consciousness'.[30] The initial singularity of the lived experience of blackness dialectically unfolds into a global, universalist emancipatory platform which, we might add, must be ready to embrace, along with its anti-racist and anti-capitalist agenda, the struggle against patriarchy and environmental degradation. It must also be open to other forms of solidarity which are yet to emerge in the future.[31]

Conclusion

What follows from this analysis is that decolonial emancipation cannot be achieved in an anti-dialectical fashion, as a liberation of a subaltern identity that is already there as being both in and for itself, even before the struggle. Even though antagonism is a necessary part

of any emancipation, a colonial relationship cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between self-contained groups defined by race, culture, language or any other fixed criteria. Institutions, discourses and practices of oppression exist at the intersection of race, class and gender. They are also organised hierarchically as a multi-layered hegemonic order in which particular identities can be imperial in one situation and subaltern in another.

Viewed in this light, the subaltern empire approach does not 'erase' the distinction between coloniser and colonised. What it does is add the crucial global dimension to any situated colonial encounter: local agents of the empire, whoever they are, usually exploit the locals while being exploited themselves in a single global network that extracts (and extorts) resources from the periphery for the benefit of the core. As we know from Antonio Gramsci, who originally coined the term, the subaltern classes, with their conservative common sense, often provide the social basis for oppressive regimes and even gleefully take part in oppressing others, whom they see as inferior to themselves.[32] For obvious reasons, this point is strongly highlighted by decolonial feminists: as Ukrainian art critic Lesia Prokopenko puts it, 'violence and injustice have never been the prerogative of the coloniser and the oppressor'.[33]

Classifying someone as a subaltern is a performative move, and it is often abused by oppressors who claim the status of victims for themselves.[34] The primary significance of this move, however, is establishing the ground for solidarity among the oppressed. The subaltern can only claim moral high ground when she withdraws from the exploitative relationship, by starting to speak *at once* on her own behalf *and* on behalf of all other subalterns.[35] Empires lack such capacity, even if they are subaltern in the sense of being peripheral and having to use Eurocentric language to express their claims to equality. Thus, I agree that engaging 'in a contest of victimhood' is a bad idea,[36] but not because only groups located at the end of the chain of oppression can legitimately claim the prize. This chain has no end; moreover, being recognised as a victim does not deliver liberation. The latter can only be achieved by addressing the oppression and injustice as such, regardless of the perpetrators' identity, and by affirming solidarity among the subaltern.

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Notes

1. Tamar Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', *Postcolonial Studies* 22(4), 2019, pp 469–489.
2. Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', p 476.
3. Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', p 484.
4. For some examples, see: Amitav Acharya, 'Global International Relations and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies', *International Studies Quarterly* 58(4), 2014, pp 647–659; Gurminder K Bhambra, 'Postcolonial Reflections on Sociology', *Sociology* 50(5), 2016, pp 960–966; Raewyn Connell, Fran Collyer, João Maia, and Robert Morrell, 'Toward a Global Sociology of Knowledge: Post-colonial Realities and Intellectual Practices', *International Sociology* 32(1), 2017, pp 21–37.
5. See a revealing summary of such criticisms in: Dirk Uffelmann, 'Postcolonial Theory as Post-Colonial Nationalism', in Monika Albrecht (ed), *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined:*

Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present, Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, pp 137–139.

6. Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', p 474.
7. Viacheslav Morozov, 'New Nationalisms and Identity Politics: Minorities, Majorities and Universal Emancipation', *European Review* 29(6), https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720000484.
8. Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', p 474.
9. Koplatadze quotes many essential readings on the topic, including: Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997; Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011. However, she seems to view all such accounts as failing to differentiate between the experience of the Russians and other subjects of the empire, and hence as supporting Russia's official discourse of victimhood. See also Valerie A Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia's Empires*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
10. Terry Martin, 'Modernization or Neotraditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism', in David Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis (eds), *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practice*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000, pp 161–184.
11. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press, 2008, pp 2, 82–83.
12. George Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, p 57. See also Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'On the Coloniality of Being', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), pp 253–257.
13. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove, 2004, pp 1–52.
14. Popular culture of the late Soviet period offers plenty of evidence that the Baltic peoples bore distinct markers of whiteness. As one of the most representative (and heavily gendered) examples, consider the character of Gerbert in Igor Maslennikov's melodrama *Winter Cherries* (Leningrad: Lenfilm, 1985).
15. Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*.
16. See the *Slavic Review* forum on Eric D Weitz, 'Racial Politics Without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges', *Slavic Review* 61(1), 2002, pp 1–29.
17. Nancy Condee in Gayatri Spivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram and Vitaly Chernetsky, 'Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space', *PMLA* 121(3), 2006, p 830.
18. Vika Kravtsova, 'Chto znachit dekolonizirovat'? Dekolonizatsiia, feminism, postsovetskoe', *Krapiva*, 30 December 2019. Available at: https://vtoraya.krapiva.org/chto-znachit-dekolonizirovat-30-12-2019 (accessed 13 January 2020).
19. Olga Burlyuk, 'Fending off a Triple Inferiority Complex in Academia: An Autoethnography', *Journal of Narrative Politics* 6(1), 2019, p 39.
20. See Fanon, *Black Skin*, p 86.
21. Burlyuk, 'Fending off a Triple Inferiority Complex', p 45.
22. Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism*, London: Routledge, 2000, p 50.
23. Gayatri Spivak in Spivak et al, 'Are We Postcolonial?', p 829.
24. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
25. Kravtsova, 'Chto znachit dekolonizirovat'?'.
26. Burlyuk, 'Fending off a Triple Inferiority Complex'.
27. Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, pp 48–49.
28. Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, p 89. See also Peter Hudis, *Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades*, London: Pluto Press, 2015, pp 52–54.
29. Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, p 91.
30. Fanon, *The Wretched*, p 93. Cf. Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, p 94.
31. The logic of my analysis is inspired by Ernesto Laclau's populist politics: Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005.
32. Guido Liguori, 'Common Sense in Gramsci', in Joseph Francese (ed), *Perspectives on Gramsci: Politics, Culture and Social Theory*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp 122–133.

33. Lesia Prokopenko, 'Vykhod iz kolonii. Proshchai, imperia', *Intermodal Terminal*, s.d. Available at: https://intermodalterminal.info/exit-colony (accessed 24 January 2020).
34. Cf. Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', pp 476–477.
35. Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp 18, 165.
36. Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', p 475.

Disclosure statement

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