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Grounds for Comparison: The Postcolonial and the Post-Soviet

Abstract

Although the general attitude towards the postcolonial-post-Soviet connection has evolved considerably during the last two decades, from the “deflected silence” (Moore 117) of the 1990s to a wide range of theoretical contributions during the 2000s that have led to the recognition of the applicability of the tools of postcolonial theory to the analysis of the post-1989 East-Central European space, there are still a good number of issues that encourage critical reconsiderations of the ways in which this connection can be tackled in order to produce more effective intellectual and political results. Building upon Marcel Detienne’s notion of *constructive comparativism* and on Mieke Bal’s traveling concepts approach, this paper aims at exploring some alternative options for dealing with this topic and thus reviving the debate around the conceptual inventory, methodological tools, and main assumptions of postcolonial studies and their relevance in addressing postcommunist issues as well as cultural practices.

Keywords: postcolonial, post-Soviet, postcommunist, constructive comparativism, traveling theory, traveling concepts.

1. Comparing the incomparable

In his book *Comparing the Incomparable*¹, the Hellenist Marcel Detienne argues for a contrastive approach to cultures and societies that he describes as “constructive (or plural) comparativism” (23, 27). Constructive, because it draws attention to the interests and choices involved in defining and circumscribing the object of study, and therefore highlights the latter’s constructedness and mutability². Plural, because the span of such an enterprise defies the expertise of any single person and challenges the limitations of traditional disciplines³. In stark contrast to “a history in search of similarities” (Braudel

¹ Marcel Detienne, *Comparer l’incomparable* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). Translated into English by Janet Lloyd as *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008). Page numbers in the text refer to the English edition.

² “When a society [...] adopts a particular element of thought, it makes a particular choice that might have been different. The job of a singular/plural analyst is to discern the constraints that affect the configurations that he or she is studying. [...] In this kind of comparativism which [...] is definitely constructive, what are ‘comparable’ are not types that may be used to establish a typology [...]; nor are they forms that make it possible to construct the morphology of either a territory or a household. Rather, they are interconnected plates (*plaques*) determined by some initial choice” (Detienne 32).

³ “[O]nce a project encompasses the entire gamut of human societies, it does not make sense for a single person to work alone. So what kind of comparativist do I have in mind? One who emerges from an intellectual network of three or four historian-anthropologists or anthropologist-historians, all convinced that it is just as important for each of them to feed on the knowledge and questions of the others as it is to set out to produce an in-depth analysis of the civilization or society whose ‘professional’ interpreter each of them began by being” (Detienne 24).

16) grounded in the assumption that only cognate phenomena can be meaningfully compared, Detienne's project of *constructing* comparables (with its remote Levinasian roots) brings together that which is dissimilar and remote in order to better grasp the cognitive dissonances and particular orientations at the core of cultural identity formations.

In practical terms, this approach consists in identifying a conceptual "entry point" into the mechanisms of thought embedded in various cultural configurations. This operative category should be comprehensive enough to allow for cross-cultural comparisons, but not so strong or prescriptive as to become "too powerfully classificatory" (Detienne 25). By studying a range of such significant features or mental attitudes onto which cultural configurations are grounded, as well as their relations to the configuration as a whole, the "plural comparativists" should be able to discover "not an essential quality but rather the multiple and shifting forms" (28) that their object of study can take – or, in other words, to expose the *modes of conceptualization* used by different cultures and societies in the process of building a coherent self-image.

Detienne's systematic effort towards epistemological democratization and intellectual defamiliarization⁴ has both practical and ethical aims. On the one hand, it calls into question traditional historical categories such as temporal, spatial, and thematic categorizations. In contrast to national/regional history and prone to ignore the law of similarity described by Braudel as the real condition of social sciences, it aims at foregrounding "a history that is open to all human societies across both space and time" and "inspired by the strongest comparative urge" (37), a history interested not in general laws but in local choices made by societies that may have no knowledge of one another. The task of the historian-anthropologist would therefore consist in establishing a "contact zone" (Pratt 34) where the operative categories or fundamental concepts that he or she has identified can be placed alongside one another in order to better understand "a number of cultures [...] in relation to others and to recognize the differences that they have constructed" (39). On the other hand, this kind of relational understanding encourages self-reflexivity and mutual awareness, and thus it invites reflection on how to build on this ground apt ways of living together.

2. Concepts in the contact zone

Although stemming from a different disciplinary background, Detienne's approach can be successfully discussed in relation to the postcolonial-post-Soviet connection on several accounts. First of all, it allows for the epistemological dismantling of large units such as the postcolonial or postcommunist "condition," and hence for their being described as mutable social, political and cultural configurations articulated around several constitutive features by means of a changing system of relations. This may seem just another way of asserting the intrinsic heterogeneity of the postcolonial or the post-Soviet, but what it actually does is to replace *normative*

⁴ "Forget the lavish advice of those who for half a century have been repeating endlessly that the best thing to do is to set up comparisons between neighbouring societies, bordering one another, that have progressed, hand in hand, in the same direction, or between human groups that have reached the same level of civilization and at a first glance present enough similarities for one to proceed safely. [...] The main thing [...] is to shake free from what is close at hand, what one is born to or native to, and recognize as soon as possible that we need to learn about *all* human societies, every community possible or imaginable, for as far as the eye can see" (Detienne 23).

descriptions with *performative* ones – or, in other words, to create the possibility of discussing the postcoloniality of the post-Soviet space without having to confront the problem of the latter’s relative inadequacy to the former’s definitional requirements.

Among the scholars debating the postcolonial-postcommunist connection, this issue has been dealt with so far in two different ways: either by claiming the right to inclusion in the postcolonial sphere by virtue of partial identification (the theories of East-Central Europe’s semi- or quasi-colonial status), or by joining forces with scholars from within the field of postcolonial studies advocating a planetary extension of the paradigm (the theories of the global postcolonial condition). In both cases, though, the attempts at “translating” the postcolonial for postcommunist use have been prompted by the same two related factors: on the one hand, the need for an overall theoretical model able to explain East-Central Europe’s recent history and the wide variety of social and cultural practices that emerged as a consequence or in the aftermath of the USSR’s domination over the former Soviet republics and the Eastern bloc; on the other, the need for the international validation of the results achieved as a consequence of the successful application / adaptation of the postcolonial paradigm to the post-Soviet space. While the first is a requirement that any emergent field is supposed to meet, and the potential lack thereof a recurrent criticism addressed at virtually all the established disciplines or academic discourses in the humanities, the second may be symptomatic for a certain peripheral sensibility to which I will come back later in this section.

The *need for theory* in categorizing, conceptualizing, and interpreting the wide variety of cultural, social and political phenomena related to the demise of the former Soviet bloc has been discussed very early on, and in rather polemical terms, by the promoters of overarching comparative models, on the one hand, and area studies specialists, on the other. Thus, in a few consecutive issues of *Slavic Review* from the mid-1990s, Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl’s arguments for the extension of the transitologist framework to the post-1989 East-Central European space have been criticized by Valerie Bunce on account of the national, ideological and cultural particularities of the region that generic analytical approaches would obscure or reduce⁵. The tension between comprehensive interpretive frameworks and local specificities has subsequently been addressed in almost all the discussions concerning the postcolonial-post-Soviet connection; in a relatively recent essay, Marcel Cornis-Pope (28) speaks of the “hodge-podge of ideological positions” that replaced the Soviet master narrative as an “ideological jumble that demands a critical reevaluation able both to challenge the fragmentation of the social sphere into self-interested local stories and to resist the counter call” of what Svetlana Boym has called “a single, all-embracing narrative –[... a] single dramatic plot with devils and angels, black and white swans, hangmen and victims” (228).

As I mentioned before, the need for theory is nowadays a shared requirement across fields of interest in the humanities; no discipline or area of studies can possibly claim to be taken seriously in the current academia in the absence of a solid theoretical framework, and theoretical fragmentation is usually seen as impeding on the development of research in any given field. While this state of affairs has its own history that depends on the meaning and value assigned to theory and theory-production, it also finds a further justification in theory’s usefulness as a heuristic tool that allows for the systematic description and interpretation of particular phenomena. At

⁵ See Schmitter and Karl; Bunce; Karl and Schmitter.

the same time, for the fields of interests placed in a subaltern or peripheral position with regard to mainstream Western critical discourse, the need for theory entails a call for epistemological emancipation; scholars working with the (ultra)minor thus seek to strengthen their theoretical frameworks as a means of moving from a position of “native informants” providing empirical data for the intellectual and academic center to one of theory-producing agents able to engage in a dialogue with the latter on equal terms. In other words, the appeal of the postcolonial paradigm for researchers working in/on the East-Central European space largely depends on the postcolonial’s position as a hard currency in today’s international market; speaking postcolonially about postcommunist issues is a way of entering the central intellectual stage through the ability of translating the vernacular realities of the post-Soviet space into the vehicular language of postcolonial theory and, more broadly, into the referential language of Anglophone cultural studies.

The establishing of a real dialogue requires not only fluency but also a potential for innovation and creative transformation in translating the postcolonial. Thus, the debates around the postcolonial-postcommunist connection has placed a special emphasis on the ability of the postcolonial-inspired postcommunist studies to function as a “critical transposition” rather than as a “mechanical translocation” (Wierzejska 396) of postcolonial concerns, concepts, and subject matter. This equals to saying that, ideally, “rerouting the postcolonial” (Wilson, Șandru, and Welsh) so as to account for the postcoloniality of East-Central Europe could contribute to the critical re-thinking of both paradigms by facilitating the emergence of a new theoretical vocabulary (Pucherová and Gáfrík 13) and the revaluation of the cultural and mental implications of both colonial and anti-colonial discourses (Pucherová and Gáfrík 14) in the light of the USSR’s exercise of power over the former Soviet republics and the Eastern bloc. And yet, despite such hopeful declarations as well as significant efforts at producing valuable re-interpretations of fundamental notions in postcolonial studies⁶, when considered from the angle of international reception the two terms of the postcolonial-postcommunist relation are still very much unbalanced. The postcoloniality of East-Central Europe remains a parochial concern addressed almost exclusively by scholars of (and/or from) the region, while largely unacknowledged by, or being perceived as irrelevant for, practitioners of postcolonial studies, and the borrowing of postcolonial frameworks for the theorization of post-Soviet realities, however critical and creative, inadvertently contributes to its being disavowed by a large portion of foreign audiences as a derivative discourse which cannot productively supplement, or compete for visibility with, the revisions and revaluations constantly produced within the postcolonial field itself.

This situation is further reinforced by the peripheral sensibility I was mentioning before, which fuels the need for theoretical validation from outside the region. I can think of no other explanation for the prominent position given to David Chioni Moore’s *PMLA* article “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique” which, although intellectually weak and strategically at odds with the regional interests in introducing the post-Soviet into the broader postcolonial debate, has become one of the major references in the discussions pertaining to the postcolonial-postcommunist connection simply because, as the editor of *Baltic Postcolonialism* puts it, “It is encouraging, perhaps even empowering to have a prominent scholar outside the diaspora community confirm the application of

⁶ See, for instance, Oțoiu, Etkind, Ștefănescu, Zirra.

postcolonial perspectives to the Baltic States” (Kelertas 4). The importance given to Moore’s *position* in the academia rather than to his *positionality* is indicative not only of the intrinsic intellectual weight attributed by local scholars to central perspectives, but also of the former’s reluctance in acknowledging the productive potential of the peripheral perspective as such, as proven by Kelertas’ alarmed reaction at the prospect of defining postcolonial theory as a diasporic product: “The sense of gratification was tempered by the awareness of statements by the Australian group speaking through the seminal text, *The Empire Writes Back*, which says that most often it is critics educated in the West and looking back at their homelands who ‘do’ postcolonialism” (Kelertas 4). This attitude may also explain why the postcolonial-postcommunist debate has so far failed to produce the close readings of basic postcolonial texts that are indispensable both for the critical reevaluation of this particular theoretical framework and for its re-situation in a post-Soviet context⁷ – and, by extension, it points to one of the reasons behind the lack of concern for the “interest implicit in the perspective” (Spivak 609) among the scholars involved. In order to produce more effective intellectual and political results, this debate needs to take into account the fact that theories are not only intellectual responses to a specific social and historical situation (Said 237), but are also rooted in particular historical and intellectual traditions, and heavily imbued with the corresponding ideological freight and epistemological biases. As Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning have aptly pointed out,

Approaches to the study of culture are themselves culturally and historically conditioned and thus subject to change and cultural variation. Though this is seldom acknowledged, let alone subjected to self-reflexive research, disciplinary and local specialization frequently pose obstacles to both the transfer of approaches and concepts from one research culture to the other, and the development of genuinely transnational and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of culture. (Neumann and Nünning 2)

From this perspective, we can distinguish between two different manners of dealing with the postcolonial-postcommunist connection. The first one would be to see this connection as an *opportunity* to expand a field of investigation or advance a specific agenda, and it is based on the understanding of theory as an explanatory model which can be used to account for realities or phenomena outside its initial area of emergence; in Said’s wake, I suggest to call this “the traveling theory approach.” If, on the other hand, we choose to deal with this comparison in terms of *challenge*, as I would rather do following the suggestions provided by Detienne’s constructive comparativism, theory will appear more like a body of situated knowledge, and research will therefore focus on the various factors that shape it, on the agents involved in its production, promotion and circulation, and on the cognitive dissonances produced by theoretical displacement. While the former approach seems quite well suited for those who support the notion of postcoloniality as a global condition, the latter – which, following Mieke Bal, I’m inclined to describe as a “traveling concepts approach”⁸ – is interested in the laying bare of the very mechanisms of thought at work in the operation of creating models, configurations, and theoretical paradigms. The second relevant feature of Detienne’s

⁷ I have tried to do that on several occasions with regard to Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin’s *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (Baicoianu 2014), Anne McClintock’s “The Angel of Progress” (Baicoianu 2015), and Moore’s article, respectively (Baicoianu 2016), but this is a project that should be pursued collectively and extensively in order to produce effective and visible results.

⁸ See Bal, Neumann and Nünning, Bachmann-Medick.

model is thus its ability to reinforce a current direction in cultural analysis that, far from showing just a narrow, parochial interest in localities, could help expand and make more flexible the conceptual framework of postcolonial studies by establishing a dialogue between its various context-shaped understandings and manipulations.

Now, do we really need this distinction or is it yet another clever exercise in hair-splitting which does little to further our knowledge of the subject matter at hand? Since both of the approaches mentioned above are, on the whole, comparative methods for dealing with a problematic relationship, is it so important to decide what kind of comparativism we should rather use? Is there, in the particular case of the postcolonial-postcommunist connection, sufficient reason to choose one over the other?

In my opinion, Detienne's constructive comparativism and Bal's traveling concepts approach can provide apt means to go beyond the self-inflicted marginality of postcommunist studies. If Madina Tlostanova is right in arguing that "There is something untranslatable in our postsocialist local histories and trajectories which postcolonial theory for all its poststructuralist sophistication and mostly Anglophone 'commonwealth literature' origin is unable to grasp" (Tlostanova 28), this is perhaps also because something is not quite right with our translations. More to the point, it seems to me that while the various attempts at translating the postcolonial into the postcommunist are not domesticating enough, the translations of the postcommunist into the postcolonial are not foreignizing enough, to use the vocabulary of Translation Studies. As a result, such translations encourage the asymmetrical relations between the two rather than successfully negotiating areas of agreement. Detienne's and Bal's interest for constructedness and contextualization could therefore participate in developing an alternative way of translating, one that Lawrence Venuti would call a "minoritizing project" (Venuti 13) fueled both by a democratic political agenda that seeks to challenge the domination of the vehicular language and by the ethical concern that would inscribe the "translated" theoretical frame with "domestic intelligibilities and interests" (Venuti 11). By cultivating heterogeneity and dissonance, such a project draws attention to what Lecerle describes as the "remainder" in the translation process – the result of the dominance of a major form over minor variables. Reminding in this respect of the Derridean *supplement*, the remainder is that which exceeds the normal communicative act, while at the same time destabilizing or subverting the major form by revealing its historical and social situatedness.

Unlike other ways of re-situating the discussion of the postcolonial-post-Soviet relation (such as, for instance, Tlostanova's decoloniality and the concept of global coloniality or the post-dependence model developed within the Polish academia), the path opened by Detienne and Bal has the additional advantage of functioning as a way out of the all-pervasive logic of domination and resistance that has been part and parcel of this debate from the very beginning. While any culture is the site of power relations that are then embedded in cultural practices and products, it is important to remember that those relations operate not only horizontally, between center and periphery, but also vertically, between different constituencies of a multilayered local reality. Bringing our concepts and operative categories out into the contact zone is therefore acknowledging that the radical heterogeneity of the objects we are working with (especially visible with respect to current literary and artistic practices both in postcolonial and in post-Soviet contexts) requires a methodological pluralism that challenges our acquired notions of what a theory should be and how it should behave.

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