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Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of  
Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial  
Difference

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### Abstract

The article considers the main challenges faced by the post-Soviet social sciences in the global configuration of knowledge, marked by omnipresent coloniality. In disciplinary terms this syndrome is manifested in the social sciences versus area studies divide from which the post-Soviet is either excluded or equalized with postcolonial discourses. The situation can be described as a general invisibility of the post-Soviet space and its social sciences and scientists for the rest of the world and the refusal of the global North to accept the post-Soviet scholar in the capacity of a rational subject. The reasons for this complex intersection of the post-Soviet, postcolonial and other post-dependence factors are both internal and external, political and epistemic. Following the methodological principles of decolonial option the author analyses such specific elements of the post-Soviet stagnant configuration in knowledge production as the external imperial difference and the double colonial difference, the geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge the way they are reflected in the knowledge production and distribution, paying specific attention to possible ways out of this epistemic dead-end.

*Keywords:* post-Soviet, coloniality of knowledge, imperial and colonial difference, disciplinary implosion, epistemic racism

### *Preliminary remarks*

The title of this article was prompted by Singaporean political scientist Kishore Mahbubani's book *Can Asians Think? Understanding the Divide Between East and West* (2001). He took a compromising position advocating the use of Western technologies and a restricted number of principles facilitating their successful implementation (such as meritocracy, education, and justice), but at the same time, accentuated the importance of maintaining the local values and cultural, ethical, social, religious and gender models, which should never be erased in favor of some generalized homogenized globalized modernity. Mahbubani's main argument is not against Western liberalism as such, although he demonstrates that democracy or political openness are not necessary for successful economic development or even for belonging to modernity in its diversified contemporary sense (Mahbubani, 2009). He just draws the attention to the fact that the West itself often violates the rules it has set and therefore loses its right to teach others how to be, its privilege to divide people into those whose rights matter and who are allowed to think, and those whose lives are dispensable and who are not considered fully rational subjects.

Asking his provocative question Mahbubani certainly does not have any doubts about his own and his fellow Asians' ability to practice rationality. What he means is why and how it happened in history that Asians were not given a chance to use their cognitive abilities to the fullest in order to join modernity on an equal basis with the West and what they should do in order to reverse that situation. Mahbubani's project thus honestly and with good faith attempts to divide the rhetoric of modernity from the logic of coloniality (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2007) assuming that we are dealing with the situation of equal opportunities and that the Orient is to be blamed for its own failures. But it is not possible to sustain this position because the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality cannot really exist without each other. The dewesternizing position exemplified by Mahbubani, remains blind to the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2012) that this article will address in relation to the post-Soviet space and its inhabitants. Alas, in this case the answer to Mahbubani's question might be less optimistic and the reasons lie in a combination of the coloniality of knowledge, external imperial difference, and double colonial difference.

### *What is coloniality of knowledge?*

Coloniality of knowledge is a typically modern syndrome, consisting in the fact that all models of cognition and thinking, seeing and interpreting the world and the people, the subject-object relations, the organization of disciplinary divisions, entirely depend on the norms and rules created and imposed by Western modernity since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and offered to humankind as universal, delocalized and disembodied. Coloniality of knowledge is a term coined by the international decolonial collective (Mignolo and Escobar, 2009) whose main task has been for over two decades to critically analyze modernity and its darker side - coloniality, to trace the genealogy of modernity's violence in relation to its internal and external others, as well as to restore the alternative genealogies of decolonial struggles in order to offer ways of delinking

from modernity/coloniality and decolonizing our being, knowledge, perception, gender, and memory. Global coloniality is different from colonialism though its origins go back to the colonization of the New World. Yet colonialism is a historical and descriptive term which does not attempt a deconstruction of epistemic and discursive grounds of the modern/colonial project and seldom ventures into the depths of the philosophy of science in order to manifest its dominant colonialist roots. Global coloniality by contrast continues long after colonialism is over and flourishes in unexpected and not evident spheres of modern disciplines and academic divisions, in the production and distribution of knowledge, as well as in geo-historical and geo-political situations that do not render themselves so obviously to any postcolonial interpretation, which is the case of the post-Soviet spaces and thinkers.

Global coloniality is always manifested in particular local forms and conditions, remaining at the same time a recognizable connecting thread for the wholesome perception and understanding of otherwise often meaningless and cruel dissociated manifestations of modernity. Ontological othering in modernity has epistemic roots because modernity above all is a knowledge generating system and not as much an objective historical process. It is an idea that describes certain historical processes in particular ways and manages to force everyone to believe that it is an objective ontological reality. Once the idea of modernity was created, it legitimized the system of knowledge that created it. Both became instruments for disavowing other systems of knowledge and pushing other historical processes outside modernity. The making of epistemic modernity went hand in hand with epistemic coloniality, that is, with colonization of knowledge by either absorbing its content or by rejecting it.

Enrique Dussel demonstrated that the darker *ego conquiro* eventually leads to the lighter *ego cogito* 'subjugating the other, the woman and the conquered male, in an alienating erotics and in a mercantile capitalist economics' (Dussel, 1995: 43). Philosophy and science which habitually focus on relations with and to objects rather than inter-human communications, and particularly, communications with the Other, are only the darker sides of the master morality of female oppression and racial differentiation. Decolonizing knowledge then means destabilizing the usual subject-object relationship from a specific position of those who have been denied subjectivity and rationality and regarded as mere tokens of their culture, religion, sexuality, race, and gender. For such people stressing the subjective specificity of our knowledge would be different from the start, from a mere postmodernist claim at situated knowledges. Becoming epistemic subjects and looking at the world from the position of our own origins, lived experiences, and education, we can then regard as objects of our study the Western imperial formations and thinkers who created institutions of knowledge that became the measure of all possible knowledges.

### *Zero point epistemology and disciplinary decadence*

Most modern disciplines being ideological and epistemic products of the West, are grounded in what Santiago Castro-Gomez called the hubris of the zero-point (Castro-Gomez, 2005), that is, an arrogant urge to take the vantage point of the observer and occupy a specific secure place exempt from reality (an observer who cannot be

observed) and seemingly free from any subjective biases and interests, claiming to be emanating pure and uncompromised Truth. Such an Archimedean position, hiding the interconnection of geo-historical location and epistemology and body-racial and gendered epistemic configurations, is also a view point grounded in certain languages and categories of thought automatically eliminating anyone who writes and thinks in a different language or uses categories and concepts unknown to the West. Castro-Gomez expresses this syndrome in the following way:

The co-existence of diverse ways of producing and transmitting knowledge is eliminated because now all forms of human knowledge are ordered on an epistemological scale from the traditional to the modern, from barbarism to civilization, from the community to the individual, from the orient to occident (...) By way of this strategy, scientific thought positions itself as the only valid form of producing knowledge, and Europe acquires an epistemological hegemony over all other cultures of the world. (Castro-Gomez, 2007: 433)

In the post-enlightenment world this zero point epistemology shifted its source and authority from God to Reason (and from theodicea to ratiodicea) making it possible for specific groups to assume such a secure and undisputed locus of enunciation.

This leads to a meaningless proliferation and implosion of disciplines, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Disciplines are often losing any links with reality and social practices, concentrating on their own, often invented solipsist problems instead. This alarming tendency has already led to many calls for undisciplining the disciplines as a way of their overcoming (Castro-Gómez and Mendieta, 1998) in order to save them for the future but also to remain faithful to social reality. Lewis Gordon entitled this phenomenon a 'disciplinary decadence' (Gordon, 2006), when a 'method facilitates the epistemic rejection of reality' (Gordon, 2010: 201) and scholars concentrate on the problems of frozen and de-ontologized disciplines and not human beings in the real world, thus rejecting unpleasant truths and turning to pleasant self-deceptions or deliberate acts of bad faith (a rethought Sartrean 'mauvaise foi') instead, as a form of war against social reality and fleeing responsibility and freedom of choice through presenting one's opinion as universally true and one's discipline as a 'rationalization of itself as world' through continued practices or even rituals of the discipline (Gordon, 2010: 54). A way out of this dead-end for Gordon lies in a critical good faith, a teleological suspension of disciplines and a willingness to rediscover anew the ideas and goals that disciplines were based on at their birth and subsequently forgot.

Gordon's opinion is supported by many other non-Western scholars (Sandoval, 2000; Smith, 1999). To cope with disciplinary decadence we must turn to those intersecting fields which are intended to shape political and intellectual coalitions with other others and eventually work for the emergence of coalitional consciousness transversal in relation to both Western and non-Western theorizing and activism.

### *Trans-disciplinarity in Western theorizing*

A recent Western mainstream example of a similar (though stemming from a different impulse) tendency to dismantling the disciplines, is to be found in Rosi Braidotti's model of critical antihumanist posthumanism which results in rethinking traditional humanities and social sciences. Braidotti claims that critical post-humanism is 'delinking the human agent from the universalistic posture, calling him to task (...) on the concrete actions he is enacting' (Braidotti, 2013: 223). For anti-humanists subject becomes more and more complex, problematic and relational, as well as framed by sexuality, corporeality, empathy, affectivity and desire. They strive to offer more positive alternatives instead of negative common vulnerability of human and non-human forms of life that global bio-genetic capitalism has to offer today. The sources of critical anti-humanism lie not only in feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist thought, but also in contemporary critical environmentalism with its struggle for new concrete forms of universality, which are based on respect for all that lives. This is opposed to Western humanism, rationality and secularity linked with sanctified science and technology. Still speaking from a privileged vantage point, though being more open to various alternative positions and sometimes attempting to appropriate and alter them for her own discourse, Braidotti links posthumanism with a move beyond anthropocentrism and expanding the notion of life towards the non-human or *zoe* - in a way echoing Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 1998), but reinterpreting *zoe* in a positive and constructive way as a non-human vital force of Life and erasing the previously stable boundary between the *bios* and the *zoe*. *Zoe*-centered egalitarianism for Braidotti is the core of the post-anthropocentric turn. It is opposed to today's political economy of turning human and non-human matter into a commodity.

Such re-branded humanities and social sciences marked by a refusal to follow the model of positive and absolute knowledge accumulation, would require a drastic change in the direction of post-anthropocentric, transdisciplinary, ethically charged inquiry in which the identity of humanistic practices will be altered 'by stressing heteronomy and multi-faceted relationality, instead of autonomy and self-referential disciplinary purity' (Braidotti, 2013: 145). This does not mean that the new humanities would abandon the crucial aspect of humanities as such - the transformative impact of the humane dimension in increasingly inhumane contexts. But, according to Braidotti, the humanists of the twenty first century should not stand on the defensive or be nostalgic of the classical humanities that we lost forever. Instead we should work on finding new ways for the post-anthropocentric humanities to evolve, such as inter- and trans-disciplinary areas between the humanities, the social sciences and the hard and natural sciences (examples include death studies, trauma studies, peace studies, humanitarian management, ecological-cum-social sustainability studies, etc.), and also to develop ever more rigorously the epistemological self-reflexivity and extroverted disciplinary culture.

### *The geo-politics and the body-politics of knowledge*

These bright perspectives for the future trans-disciplinary disciplines would be entirely true and quite attractive if it was not for today's persisting and even increasing power asymmetry in the production and distribution of knowledge, to which Braidotti remains largely blind for the reasons of her privileged body-politics and geopolitics of knowledge. The geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge represent epistemic and political projects formulated by the experiences and memories of historical agents who were erased as cognitive subjects. The geopolitics of knowledge refers to the local spatial and temporal grounds of knowledge. The body-politics refers to individual and collective biographical grounds of understanding and thinking rooted in particular local histories and trajectories of origination and dispersion. Locality here is understood not merely as a geo-historical location but also as an epistemic correlation with the sensing body, perceiving the world from a particular local history (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006).

If Foucauldian bio-politics deconstructs the management of power and its struggle for the right of interpretation, the decolonial body-politics displaces epistemology from its Eurocentric location to the non-Western and non-hegemonic locales and bodies marked by racial, sexual, religious, ethnic and other differences which allows one to render them as dispensable lives, sub-humans, second class citizens and practitioners of condemned religions. The non-European people who have been denied the right and ability to think, who experience various forms of epistemic racism, are the ones who feel persistent power asymmetries in the production and distribution of knowledge in the most painful way.

They can identify with Walter Mignolo's dictum, paraphrasing Cartesian 'Cogito ergo sum' into 'I am where I think':

I am where I think' sets the stage for epistemic affirmations that have been disavowed. At the same time, it creates a shift in the geography of reasoning. For if the affirmation 'I am where I think' is pronounced from the perspective of the epistemologically disavowed, it implies 'and you too,' addressed to the epistemology of the zero point. In other words, 'we are all where we think,' but only the European system of knowledge was built on the belief that the basic premise is 'I think, therefore I am', which was a translation into secular terms of the theological foundation of knowledge (in which we already encounter the privilege of the soul over the body) to secular terms (Mignolo, 2011: 169).

The 'sanctioned ignorance', in Gayatri Spivak's well known formulation (Spivak, 1999: 164) of the West towards the homogenized non-West, including its periphery and semi-periphery, of the appropriation and trivialization of any knowledge produced outside the West and more and more even just outside the Anglo-American context, has been thoroughly analyzed and criticized within such critical discourses as radical postcolonial theory (Eze, 1997), non-Western feminism (Mohanty, 1984), various alter-global discourses (Shiva, 2006). Take for instance, Egyptian writer and gender activist Nawal el Saadawi who detected this syndrome in a Wellesley conference on women and development:

'The well meaning US organizers (...) had no idea how maternalistic and condescending they sounded, in both words and attitudes, when they read papers or talked at the participants, telling them how to behave (...) For the US organizers, power was not the issue, because *they* had it, and thought it normal for us not to participate (...) The organizers had the capacity to turn the Third World women's protests into 'personal defects' (Saadawi, 1998: 148).

But powerful critical interventions such as this have not so far changed the general modern logic of knowledge production which is still grounded in rigid taxonomies, effective annihilations and sly appropriations. An interesting example is to be found in the case of intersectionality which has gone from a radical Black feminist stand-point discourse (Hull et al., 1982) to a blurred and depoliticized reinterpretation within contemporary European mainstream feminism. Intersectionality has lost or started to hide its locality, its rootedness in a particular local history, assuming a position withdrawn from any locality. Today it is more and more a position of belonging to some vague common global transnational feminist culture (Carbin and Edenheim, 2013). But such a fogging is unable to hide the persistent power asymmetries for whose revelation intersectionality was coined to start with. The question arises once again - who speaks in and of intersectionality and from what position is the enunciation made? Who enunciates intersectionality? Is the enunciation in intersectionality a new discipline? And in what intersection of intersectionality does the enunciation take place? An alarming tendency is that too often the subject who speaks of intersectionality is not really located in any of the intersections she discusses, but openly or more often surreptitiously stands above as the observer, and remains untouched by the intersection in question. The more important it becomes to focus on different tangential genealogies of knowledge, being, gender, perception, and to shift the emphasis from the enunciated to the enunciation.

### *The lighter and the darker sides of the cold war disciplinarity and its aftermath*

Western social sciences have for a long time ignored the collapsed USSR and there were many reasons for that. The enemy was conquered and it was not important any more to spend as much money on the sovietological area studies as before. This tendency is obvious already in Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' discourse (Fukuyama, 1992) after which came a typical Western understanding of the post-Soviet in temporal rather than spatial sense, rendering irrelevant millions of people who still struggle with their existence in the territory to the East of the West. As a result many grants and programs were redistributed along different geopolitical divisions that were more fitting for the new situation in which the post-Soviet world was a void. Russia and many of its former and present colonies could not fit the architecture of knowledge and the emerging post-cold war corporate university (Chomsky, 1997; Readings, 1996).

As is known, in the cold war university social sciences rather than humanities took the central position both in their imperial version (the term 'social sciences'



usually referred to the studies of the West and conducted by Western researchers, and it was here that new theoretical and meta-theoretical models, schools, and general approaches usually emerged in sociology, anthropology, history, and political science) and in their colonial version of area studies, usually more applied and descriptive in their nature, and having more concrete and not always attractive geopolitical goals. Deniz Kandiyoti observes that knowledge production about the world is still a metropolitan (Euro-Atlantic) affair (Crossroads Asia, 2015). Edgardo Lander adds that 'the problem resides in the colonial imaginary from which Western social sciences constructed their interpretation of the world' (Lander, 1998: 71).

Social sciences as a product of the cold war academia have been actively questioned and criticized in the last twenty five years everywhere, including in the West itself. As for their area studies version here as well many Western specialists have been radically rethinking the previous colonizing approaches to the study of the other. Such is a recent initiative *Cross-Roads Asia Network* in Bonn which is attempting to rethink area studies through what they call a post-area studies approach grounded in thematic figurations and mobility and thus stressing dynamic changeability, flexibility and complex interaction of and in the East as its defining feature in contrast with usual Orientalist interpretations (Crossroads Asia). The socialist world was studied somewhere in between but certainly closer to the colonial side, within its separate area studies model of sovietology. It existed on substantial financial support until 1989, when this peculiar form of area studies failed to offer any sufficient over-all models to explain the collapsed USSR which stopped to be regarded as one homogeneous region and started to be redistributed along different lines.

Some of its parts drifted in the direction of the object of study within the still flourishing Western area studies. This shift is obvious in David Chioni Moore's article in *PMLA* forcefully applying postcolonial theory to post-socialist reality (2001). However it proved difficult to lump together Eastern and South-Eastern European countries, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia proper and Siberia without taking into account the complex interplay of colonial and imperial differences and intersecting experiences of various subalternized empires and their internal and external others. It is important that the application of the postcolonial theory to the analysis of the post-Soviet and wider, post-socialist world was done first by a Western scholar (and not even by diasporic postcolonial scholars in the West who were less ready to equate communism with colonialism but also were more sensitive to obvious differences between the two models). Sadly, there were no efforts from the side of the post-Soviet researchers themselves to have their say about their own experience and set the stage for the future separate discourse. This was an alarming indication of a more severe (than in the global South) case of coloniality of knowledge in the case of the failed socialist modernity. There were sporadic interesting works on the post-Soviet condition, written by Western scholars and several diasporic thinkers from the former Soviet republics claiming a more European belonging (Ukraine, Belarus, Baltic countries) (Chernetsky, 2007; Bobkov, 2005). Methodologically they followed the Western social sciences and the humanities. But with few exceptions their Eastern European genealogical traces have interfered in the process of assimilation into the global knowledge production system, whereas the previous exotic attraction of the



socialist other, a dissident fighter contesting an inhuman regime, did not work any more. Russia itself has become almost non-existent both as a subject (producer of knowledge) and as an object of study for social sciences. It has lost its former secure central place in the sovietologic brand of area studies as well as its integrity as a geopolitical region (for area studies often precede, imagine and model the future real political re-divisions).

### *The imperial difference and the post-Soviet coloniality of knowledge*

The asymmetrical knowledge configuration is no news and a number of non-Western scholars have recently started to discuss the possibilities and tools for going beyond the mere recognition model and elaborating alternative methods, perspectives and optics (Mignolo, 2014). However the collapsed Soviet Union and its present remnants, some of which are independent states while others still remain satellites and quasi-colonies of Russia, is a region whose recent local history has affected the global situation yet did not allow its inhabitants to become knowledge producers and has in some cases even withdrawn this privilege if they had it before. In a way this trajectory was the opposite to the usual logic of the non-Western world slowly entering the space of rationality which we find in postcolonial cases. In the post-Soviet case the shift is reversed, from the second world to the global South or to a strange limbo of the poor North which refuses to be equalized with the poor South and which in addition to that has its own South and East of the poor North (Tlostanova, 2011). Jennifer Suchland attempted to articulate various versions of the emerging post-socialist critique which would consciously avoid reproducing the geographic ideologies of the Cold War knowledge production and in applied postcolonial theory to make sense of our complex experience (2011: 109). Suchland accurately stressed the failure of the old Western sovietology and the new (but methodologically parochial) Eurasian programs still rehearsing the cold war discourses of dissent (2011: 105), to understand or sufficiently explain the complex post-socialist pattern. The post-Soviet condition as its part has been determined by external imperial and double colonial difference transparent in the West/East and North/South divisions. Colonial difference refers to the differential between the first class capitalist empires of modernity (the so called heart of Europe) and their colonies, as the absolute others of the first world or the global North today.

Imperial difference refers to various losers which failed to or were prevented by different circumstances and powers from fulfilling their imperial mission in secular modernity taking as result various second-class places. Importantly, they were intellectually, epistemologically and culturally colonized by the winners and developed a catching up logic, an array of psychological hang-ups, schizophrenic collective complexes, ideologies of the besieged camp or alternatively, victory in defeat and consequently lapses into imperial jingoism and revenge.

Imperial difference is not homogeneous as it is further divided into internal and external versions. The former refers to the European losers of the second (secular) modernity which subsequently became the South of Europe, while the latter means

the not-quite-Western, not-quite-capitalist empires of modernity, for instance the Ottoman Sultanate or Russia as a paradigmatic case of such a Janus-faced racialized empire which feels itself a colony in the presence of the West and plays the part of a caricature civilizer mimicking European colonization models and missions in its own non-European colonies. The external imperial difference which was coded as colonial in the West, generated Russia's secondary status in European eyes and consequently, an open or hidden orientalization. At the same time within Russia itself there is a specific version of secondary Orientalism as a direct result of secondary Eurocentrism. The imperial difference generated an open or hidden orientalization of Russia by the West. This sensibility can be defined as a balancing between the role of an object and that of the subject in epistemic and existential sense. Western Orientalist discourses have been transmuted in secular modernity as specific ways of representation and interpretation of Russian non-European colonies, which were used as replacements of the missing Orient and coded as such. In the end both mirrors – the one turned in the direction of the colonies and the one turned by Europe in the direction of Russia itself—appear to be distorting mirrors that create a specific unstable sensibility of Russian scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

Russia projected its own inferiority complexes onto its non-European colonies in the Caucasus and Central Asia through its self-proclaimed modernizer and civilizer role. The Russian colonies either felt the double dictate of coloniality of knowledge in its modern Western and Russian/Soviet versions, or, regarding themselves as standing higher on the human scale (within the same Western modern epistemic system, grounded in taxonomizing people into those who have the right and the ability to produce knowledge and those who are doomed to act as objects of study and consumers of theories produced in the West) than the Russian subaltern empire, have refused its dictate and negated its epistemic authority, choosing a direct European influence instead and dreaming to become at some point fully integrated.

### *The lacking post-Soviet studies and the subaltern position of the post-Soviet researchers*

In contrast with postcolonial theory, which has early developed into a separate disciplinary sphere and has been rather quickly institutionalized in academia, whereas its main practitioners from the start have been the postcolonial others themselves, who made it to the West, the post-Soviet discourse has never been legitimized other than in the area studies form in the West and later in the semi-periphery of the ex-Socialist world where once again, the Western influence and money determined the specificity and the optics of analyzing the Soviet and post-Soviet experience. The previous trajectories of knowledge were violently erased and the scholars who wanted to join the global knowledge production club were offered to start from scratch ignoring both the previous general Soviet experience and Soviet knowledge as outdated and ideological throughout, and also – particularly in the case of non-European colonies, ignoring their own local histories and genealogies of thought, or rather what was left of them as a result of the forced Soviet modernization.

This manipulation turned out successful in the case of the older generation of scholars (and I do not mean the remaining orthodox Marxist-Leninists or today's extreme right nationalists) who were sick and tired of the Soviet censorship and double think, and who tended to idealize the West, which they seldom ever visited, as a manifestation of freedom, democracy and equality (Akhiezer, 1998; Pelipenko and Yakovenko, 1998; Afanasyev, 2001; SAQ 2006; Podoroga, 1993). These scholars did not realize for a long time that the new model of knowledge they were offered or chose willingly to adopt after the collapse of the Soviet Union was not an objective Truth, just one more possible opinion. They were not ready to accept that social sciences as such could never hope to be free from ideology, not necessarily Marxist-Leninist any more. Hence their efforts to make a new Truth out of whatever Western theory they came across and used to replace the previous Marxist dogmatism. A typical example of such secondary Eurocentric and westernizing/modernizing stance is Yuri Afanasyev's book *Dangerous Russia* in which the well-known Soviet-post-Soviet historian offers a powerful critique of the contemporary state of affairs in Russia, seen through the Annales school perspective, but fails to offer any persuasive positive program because for him the only ideal we should follow is the romanticized Western liberal model with which we must finally catch up. Naturally Afanasyev links Russia's dangerous qualities with its presumably archaic Asiatic nature, calling it a "Tatar-Mongol Russian empire overburdened with its Horde genetics" (2001: 75). This prevents the country from "developing" and becoming "quite civilized". It is a clear case of a Russian historian mimicking Western methodologies, emanating Western Orientalist myths and civilizational constructs with almost the same fervor which he had to apply before, when transmitting the historical materialist dogmas.

In a quite problematic taxonomy offered by M. Sokolov and K. Titayev (Sokolov and Titayev, 2013), this group of scholars would be defined as "provincial" as opposed to "indigenous" - the term Sokolov and Titayev use in an extremely derogative and racist sense (which tells us a lot about contemporary younger Russian scholarship as well) meaning in fact the so called national brands of science insulated from the rest of the world. The latter is a continuation of the Soviet positionality and is not even worth discussing. As for the reformed Soviet social scientists to whom I referred above and many of whom were quite critical in their ideological and cognitive stance, they have become post-structuralists, structural functionalists, civilizational theorists and Bourdieuseans overnight, yet often continue suffering from typically positivist Soviet-Marxist and ratioidicean principles of cognition, making their discourses a bit outdated from the start.

The younger generation of the post-Soviet scholars, both post-imperial and postcolonial, have often been indoctrinated by the Western system of knowledge directly in the West having free access to study abroad programs, which has become possible only in Perestroika years, and additional social and cultural capital connected with a good command of foreign languages (Bikbov, 2014; Vakhshain, 2011; Chukhrov, 2011; Shakirova, 2012; Megoran and Sharapova, 2013). The youngest of them sometimes did not even go through the Soviet ordeal, yet early on discovered the ulcers of neo-liberalism and the distortions of embodied democracies, as well as later the suffocating neocolonial and nationalist environment of their post-Soviet nation-states. This diverse experience and an early exposure to multiple truths,

knowledge models and verification systems, was generally quite favorable, but in most cases have still resulted in a secondary Eurocentric and derivative stance largely due to their more pragmatic attitude to social and academic status. These younger scholars did not go as far as to question the Western monopoly of knowledge production and distribution or chose to abstain from its criticism in order to gain access to this very system.

An interesting example is presented in the way a young sociologist Victor Vakhsthain has refurbished the older Soviet journal *Sociology of Power* (2014) to make it more attuned to global academic norms. The journal indeed improved a lot and is comparable to Western sociological publications, as it speaks the same language and discusses similar problematics. But there is a darker side to this mimicking that is precisely a lack of any individualized face, a narrow focusing on exclusively Latourian sociology with a complete and almost arrogant neglect of anything else, and hence a quick turning of the journal into yet another small island of corporate culture, a closed community with its own precise interests and falsely esoteric discussions repeating and reproducing the actor-network theory verbatim. The question is then, which is better? A Soviet style besieged academia, a post-Soviet national(ist) home-bred brand of academic discourses or the Westernized parroting excluding anyone who is not a Lacanian, Latourian, Habermasian, etc.

A lot of these younger academics are making their dazzling careers based on translating, commenting and sometimes retelling the works of the Western luminaries, which they often substituted for any real original scholarship. When and if these younger people come back home to study their own regions and already carrying with them the hubris of the zero point, and someone else's point at that, it takes them some time to realize that no matter how diligently they copy the Western teachers, their own place in the scholarly hierarchy has remained secondary and subservient with very few exceptions, a place of the native informant and not a producer of theory which remains a privilege of the West. And it is only then that very few of these younger scholars have started to problematize the coloniality of knowledge. Most of them are still invisible in academia as they are at the stage of finishing their PhDs and have not yet started to publish their works widely (Aripova, Kudaibergenova, Gevorgyan-Dovtjan). In Russia and in most of the post-Soviet countries, the traditions of secondary Eurocentrism and the intellectual dependence it reproduces, remain quite powerful and there is no book or even article yet, which I could offer here as an example of a serious critique of the Western monopoly on knowledge and a viable post-Soviet response to it. These sensibilities no doubt exist but have not yet been shaped into a coherent discourse.

The invisibility of the post-Soviet social sciences for the West is not only a product of the global epistemic structural asymmetry. The kind of social sciences produced in the USSR or its remnants today with very few exceptions are really mediocre and derivative, mostly reproducing the outdated Western methods and tools without realizing or criticizing their geopolitical contextuality, and more and more alarmingly, lapsing into quasi-religious orthodoxy replacing research. Such studies seldom appear in global academia not because they are Russian, but because they are insulated from the global scholarship on their own initiative - through the familiar besieged camp model, through a fixation on pre-post-structuralist stages in

social sciences, through ignoring the vital problematic of post(neo)colonial conflicts and global challenges. Interestingly enough even today's decidedly jingoistic forms of Russian scholarship actively engaged in and by official propaganda, are mostly non-original and stemming from previous Western conservative and essentialist (rather than constructivist) sources (Dugin, 2014). This happens due to the chronic inability of the zone of external imperial difference to produce any independent knowledge. The Janus-faced empire whose links with its own epistemologies have long been lost and forgotten, sinks deeper and deeper into extremist militant forms of self-exclusion and intellectual revanchism.

Freeing oneself from coloniality of knowledge is a long and painful process which requires learning to unlearn in order to relearn but on different grounds and sometimes actually creating and remaking these grounds (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). Post-Soviet space and particularly Russia are not ready to discuss their own previous experience or today's unfortunate condition other than in the forms of nostalgic lacquered Soviet myth (as we find in today's propaganda, including its scholarly versions) or in the form of the no less simplified but negative anti-Soviet annihilation unconditionally idealizing the West. What is needed instead is an honest critical discourse which would be able to finally get rid of the intellectual dependency and the catching up modus and start to develop its own knowledge about itself that would be original and vigorous enough not to be immediately racialized and subalternized in the global North.

### *The post-Soviet internal coloniality of knowledge vis-à-vis the global epistemic coloniality*

Inside the remaining shrinking zone of Russian influence there is its own smaller scale version of the same intellectual racism and power asymmetry in relation to the former non-European parts of the USSR which are not regarded as a potential knowledge producers if their scholars do not repeat the Russian colleagues' ideas hat in hand and chose to bypass them through referring to the 'authentic' Western modernity or delink from modernity as such and turn to their own epistemic traditions instead.

As a secondary empire in modernity Russia has never managed to occupy the position of a rational subject and stayed at the level of producing culture (literature, ballet, etc.) and natural resources. The only exceptions were the sporadic attempts to revolt against the Western intellectual dominance through decolonizing impulses of a subalternized empire such as the Slavophile movement in the nineteenth century and later the Eurasianists whose ideas are often trivialized in contemporary Russian neo-imperial reactionary political movements and in the works of their social theorists. These paradoxically dissenting imperial discourses (as opposed to official conservative imperial imaginary and sciences) still applied Western methodological and theoretical tools even if they were aimed at destroying the Western epistemic dictate. This chronic intellectual dependency could not be overcome even in the case of the massive application of religious discourses in what stood for social sciences.

In the second half of the twentieth century even this meager resource of independent knowledge was cut off and the resulting post-Soviet social sciences

emerged as pale copies of the long forgotten Western originals. When these copies are further recopied in Central Asia or the Caucasus it becomes a doubly colonized knowledge losing any links with reality and any activist edge. As a result the post-Soviet space emerges as marked with many silences and omissions, unspoken resentments and continued scorns between Russian and non-Russian, secondary European and non-European subjects. The latter are often even less aware of their discrimination and not ready to formulate their own stance than in the case of postcolonial or women of color and other such discourses of dissent (Kasymova, 2005; Tekuyeve, 2006)

This indicates thoroughly colonized minds marked by one maniacal urge to become a peripheral part of someone else's modernity, even at the expense of their own kind. Besides, the former (Russian post-imperial scholars) in contrast with many honest and open-minded European researchers, are not really expressing any interest in coalitions with the Orientalized others, sticking to their own agendas which belatedly repeat and reproduce the Western ones.

Any scholars elaborating their own critical post-Soviet theory formulated from the border position between the Western and Soviet/Russian modernity/coloniality without subscribing to any of them, are immediately marginalized. In the present political situation their position would never be legitimized as it is opposed to the official state mythologies. In relation to the ex-colonial post-Soviet social scientists, the neo-imperial intellectual racism acquires subtler forms than in the case of guest workers, because it is obvious from the start that these people cannot be branded entirely subhuman or backwards. It quickly becomes apparent that they can speak and think. The very existence of this group of people is making many Western and Russian researchers feel uncomfortable as it destroys their progressivist taxonomy grounded in Orientalist stereotypes, pigeonholing Asian people as stereotypically downtrodden and retarded Orientals/Muslims who are supposed to reject their culture to become pale copies of Soviet or Western modern subjects (Tlostanova, 2010).

An author-critic forum on decolonial theory and gender research in Central Asia published in an area studies journal *Central Asian Survey* (Megoran et al., 2012) revealed this persisting epistemic power asymmetry when some Western researchers refused to complicate their simple picture of Central Asia with more nuanced and subtle categories and subjectivities, relying on presumably objective 'facts' that they had found during their short trips to local archives and subsequently universalized (and demonstrating a sad lagging behind in realizing that there is no history without interpretation and no interpretation has a monopoly on truth that examples and cases do not have an ontological existence beyond the choice and the uses of a scholar). Central Asian researchers mostly agreed on the continuing discrimination and Orientalism in relation to themselves in Western dominated academia, yet refused to question the generally accepted Western scientific terminology and approaches defending them, once again, as presumably objective and uncontaminated by locality and/or ideology and silently agreeing that knowledge is always produced in the West.

The latter is a manifestation of mind-colonization which in case of the ex-colonial others has resulted in unhealthy self-orientalising and self-negation or in Duboisean terms - in a peculiar double consciousness which is very hard to resolve. In the Caucasus and Central Asia the Soviet modernity is replaced with either the



Western progressive model or the pedaling of official national(ist) discourses. The complex indigenous cosmologies discordant with modernity/coloniality are erased or negatively coded even in the works of local scholars themselves who are forced to buy their way into the academic sphere through conforming to Western mainstream research.

As for Russia, it has been increasingly dogged by a largely self-infused controversy that does not allow it to move forward, backward or beyond. The still not quite collapsed empire sinking deeper and deeper into chronic periphery is stuck in under-expressed models, unfinished decolonisations, interrupted repentances, never sufficiently demythologized consciousness, and therefore it strives to assemble bits and pieces of often mutually exclusive elements such as national fundamentalism, mock Soviet, neo-imperial, neoliberal and other ideologies, anachronisms, epistemic inconsistencies, that are so typical of today's disjointed mechanism of cultural processes. This complex layering and struggle of various competing forms of epistemic colonialities leads to a stagnation.

It also leads to conceptually conflicting movements affecting academia in the most painful way. Social sciences find themselves in the grip of both ideological servility and necessity of serving the power to survive, and recent unsubstantiated demands of this very power to make the local social sciences globally competitive in their knowledge production. The chronic inability to produce original models of critical thinking comes from the typical Russian intellectual inferiority complex (a colonial complex at that) often externally resolved in its opposite - a fundamentalist jingoist besieged fortress stance deflated as quickly as it emerges as it has no solid ground and therefore cannot have a voice of its own. On the one hand, Russia is rapidly turning into a culturally and religiously fundamentalist police state suspecting any research supported by Western grants or even just resembling the Western sources in its style or manner of presentation and thinking, in being 'foreign agents'. On the other hand, this mock Soviet renaissance in today's corporate-cum-administrative university which is a product of an unsuccessful experiment of breeding the worst qualities of the Soviet and neoliberal educational systems, is accompanied by an opposite movement when professors are told under pain of dismissal to force our way into global scholarship through publishing abroad, increasing our citation rates, getting grants, as the power is trying to forcefully improve Russia's scientific rating applying a mixture of the old Soviet hasty five year plan approaches and the neo-liberal corporate scientometric principles.

The epidemic of rating and index anxiety in today's post-Soviet space is particularly harmful for social sciences and the humanities where there can be no single truth or verification mechanism, where there are no absolute authorities and where the strive for multiplicity of interpretations have long become a norm. All of this does not fit the scientometric craze within which the falsely venerated words like Scopus, Web of Science, Academic Journals Database in fact stand for gadgets and institutions with quite specific disciplinary and ideological, corporate and managerial genealogy and philosophy far from being objective or disinterested, and yet offered as some unquestionable criterion of scientific quality corresponding to the philosophy of science of at least 50 years ago, The rating-index anxiety itself is a manifestation of a typical for the post-soviet space inferiority complex and efforts to hide behind the



bureaucratic requirements a lack of any real scholarly achievements or healthy inter-academic communication (Jibladze, 2013; Ivakhnenko, 2013; Tlostanova, 2013).

There are other elements in this contradictory mixture, such as the shadow economy models transferred to universities: researchers are often required to literally bring money to their administrative bosses and institutions (through unfairly divided grants, network marketing for trapping the prospective students and other such methods). Finally, there is the good old Russian and Soviet tradition of treating a university professor as a state official who is supposed to be loyal to the regime and if not – immediately fired if not imprisoned.

### *Possible ways out?*

Real ways out of the complex intersection of internal and external epistemic asymmetries in the case of the post-Soviet space are not in recognition claims – asking the global North to recognize the Russian and post-Soviet presence in knowledge production is ineffective and meaningless. Instead of that we should delink from the losing battle and from the logic of catching up and dependency discourses in the sphere of knowledge production (Lander, 2000), and concentrate on creating a relevant social science which would be well aware of other models, including the latest Western and especially non-Western ones (to which so far Russian scholars condescendingly remain blind because of their old imperial attitudes), but would not simply repeat them or apply them to a different material.

Restoring an essential vital link of any social science with social reality and experience, would lead to attempts to create a serious but still missing critical conceptualization of the history of the Soviet modernity. Instead of that in Russia we find the familiar thoughtless reproduction of the cold war knowledge architecture, disciplinary decadence as an effort to hide the absence of any relevant existential, epistemic or at least political and social projects behind the disciplinary implosion and tightening disciplinary boundaries and restrictions supported by such still existing Soviet bureaucratic institutions as the Higher Attestation Committee which is responsible for inventing and banning disciplines, and strangles any inter-disciplinarity (or trans-disciplinarity) in the bud. Russian social sciences are plagued by their chronic accent on the enunciation from and in the disciplines and not on who is the enunciator and what are the problems themselves crossing the disciplines in today's more and more complex social world. Russian social sciences continue to reproduce the unfortunate model of reactive description of what has already happened applying the outdated and often conservative approaches to make sense of what is described. There are almost no models projected into the future or attempting to model this future other than in mythic/reactionary or rationalist neoliberal way.

Coming back to the question asked in the beginning we must conclude that so far the post-Soviet space has not been able to demonstrate to the world and to itself that its inhabitants can indeed think. This does not mean that the situation has to stay like that forever, but there is almost no time left to reverse it. Coloniality of knowledge in the conditions of external imperial difference in Russia, in the USSR and today, including the darker side of its secondary colonial difference, generates severe

stagnation in social sciences which prevents these disciplines from becoming a part of global science. Some of the complex reasons for this unfortunate conjuncture at the intersection of external and internal circumstances were briefly addressed in the article. They cannot be taken to stereotypical notions of both the cunning West defending its monopoly on knowledge production and underdeveloped Russia as a permanent Sahara of social sciences.

The only way out of this frozen bipolarity is a conscious willingness on the part of the few post-Soviet social scientists capable of doing it, to decolonize knowledge and to get rid of the self-colonizing syndrome as well. The value of any independent social approaches then would be linked with their ability to disavow the epistemic grounds of the rhetoric of modernity and its disciplines and methods which in the dominant system are presented as the only legitimate ones and existing forever, and turn to the goals and tasks of academia that have been long forgotten, such as the crucial aim of the university to shape not a submissive and loyal narrow specialist in some applied science but first of all a critically thinking self-reflexive and independent individual, never accepting any ready-made truths at face value, truly and unselfishly interested in the world around in all its diversity and striving to make this world more harmonious and fair for everyone and not only for particular privileged groups. And is this not ultimately the true mission of a vigorous decolonized social theory?

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