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Afrikanizacija: Eastern European Epistemologies and African Labour

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Abstract

The paper offers a critical reading of Eurocentrism and Western hegemony of social thought by highlighting the essential similarities between the African and post-1989 Eastern European experience. It argues that Eastern European local knowledge and *difference* should be addressed in new ways, which take into account our neo-colonial negation and subjugation. The reorientation of what I call an essentially orientalist discourse in Eastern Europe can come from renewed engagement, after a nearly thirty-year gap, with African political theory, labour activism, and resistance movements. The article offers a discussion in what ways the African experience can be paralleled with the Eastern European peripheral integration into the global capitalist economy and it argues that African social thought, which has been hitherto largely neglected in post-socialist Eastern Europe, can, indeed, have illuminating insights into a history of global marginalisation. Further, I argue, that in that sense, African social thought can be an inspiring source in order to reorient current Eastern European histories, which have been developing self-defeating, self-deprecating and self-orientalising tendencies since at least 1989. *Afrikanizacija*, a grand metaphor for our region's descent into a world of neo-colonialism, should also mean that we recognise the liberating and emancipating contents of African social thought especially in the fields of labour and feminism when we look for ways to fight Western hegemony.

Keywords: African Labour, *Afrikanizacija*, Nigeria, Academic Identity Politics, Eastern European Epistemologies.

In this essay, we first address the riddle of how, under conditions on de-industrialisation, organised working class struggle is more and more relevant in the early 21st century in Africa. In Eastern Europe, de-industrialisation has not reached African levels (in most places) but organised labour and Marxian theory has arguably become even weaker in our region than in Africa. We then go on to offer a metaphor for Eastern Europe's neoliberal descent into its current conditions. The term *Afrikanizacija* is drawn from the Yugoslav experience of the mid-1990s but in this essay we argue that its application goes far beyond Eastern Europe's war zones and pockets of third world underdevelopment: the retreat from social services by the state has made *Afrikanizacija*, the convergence with Africa's peripheral economies, a region-wide reality. In the African context, flag independence from the 1960s usually coexisted with neo-colonial systems. Those systems allowed for some limited development in the 1960s and 1970s, but deteriorated in the 1980s and the 1990s, creating in Africa numerous military dictatorships and unliveable hell-holes, while maintaining extraction economies for the benefit of the global capitalist order in tandem with local compradors. Today, wars in the former Soviet peripheries, autocratic systems in different parts of Eastern Europe, and also anti-immigrant hysteria all point to a replay of 1990s Africa in the Eastern European theatre of global capitalism.

Naturally, Eastern European academics are not in the position to single-handedly re-build the moribund trade unions, or to revitalise the workers' struggle in the region. What we may do, and should do, is that we should build theory on which eventually, activism might be built in the future. It is with this in mind that in this article, we offer uses for the re-engagement, after a 30 year gap, of African Marxist social and political theory. Eastern Europe before 1989 did furnish Africa with genuine transfers of technology, credit, and know-how (including the know-how of building Bolshevik type vanguard parties). Today advice must flow the opposite way. It is my conviction that African social scientists' experience with Western domination, extraction of resources, super-exploitation of the work force, the necessity of emigration for professionals, the emergence of right wing radical rule and de-industrialisation, will make it worthwhile for Eastern European social scientists to study the works of Africa's theorists exactly to gain ideas on how to analyse and address those negative phenomena.

This essay then goes on and argues for academic identity politics in the Eastern European region. Instead of offering morality tales for the West on why their political, economic and social systems are always best; and instead of offering caricatures of our own historical failings, we should learn pride from Africa's radical minds from Fanon to Madunagu, when we want to face up to Western condescension. This is done here with the help of Ramon Grosfoguel's refutation of universalistic notions of Western philosophy of knowledge, and the recognition that Eastern Europe has had indigenous achievements that merit historical pride.

It is difficult to build historical pride in a region that sees itself in light of its current colossal failure and through the eyes of its incumbent neo-colonial masters before it can realistically weigh itself on the scales of history. Pride in fields of the human imagination is not very easy in Eastern Europe to develop as the region has not been the cradle of world religions or philosophies. However, beyond practical

historical achievements, Eastern Europe has built systems of thought that we may be proud of (from Leftist thinkers to the pockets of paleo-conservatism that *hassidism* represents). In the Central-Eastern European sub-region, a British historian and commentator notices extremely pertinent ways in which the region's history hinders its healthy development and self-image. This is contrasted with theoretical approaches by thinkers such as Hobsbawm and Gellner to present how Central-Eastern Europe, despite its tragic history, has also having been something of a laboratory of thought, ideas, nationalisms, and their discontents. My essay ends with a warning that if we fail to uncover objectively, our own condition and let Eastern Europe's political elites subjugate the region to the ever-growing demands of international capital then further economic and epistemic decline is inevitable, and Eastern Europe's trajectory will eventually converge with that of the super-exploited economies of West Africa.

New vistas in the field of African Labour

The unique role that the African workers' movement plays on that continent has recently been noticed once more and completely re-evaluated after decades of academic neglect especially in the Atlantic countries. Pnina Werbner's *The Making of an African Working Class*, Immanuel Ness's *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class*, Zachariah Mampilly's *Africa Uprising and Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War*, are all in print and they all point to a massive and sustained, renewed interest in African rebel movements that form and operate on the basis of class and not on the basis of *ethnic politics*, that vicious darling of mainstream narratives.

It has now been widely recognised that ethnic and ethnicist explanations often serve to explicate the neo-colonial master and to implicate the victim. After scores of proxy wars fought out for international corporations from the Congo to the Central African Republic that in aggregate have killed millions in the last two decades, and after fundamentalist fanatics have launched Salafist insurgencies and triggered US televangelist style Protestant 'awakenings,' with literal witch hunts, and inter-religious warfare all over the African continent, it is time that academia recognised how embedded its mainstream liberal explanations and ideas are in the 'mainstream' web of global corporate interests. It is indeed high time that academia move beyond an unwitting service to those interests through its own indirect ways. It is now important to assess possibilities of an entire plethora of genuine emancipatory theory from (post) industrial working class activism to radical feminist takes, as well as addressing questions of how progressive kinds of 'identity construction' (in this case mainly class and gender) may actually serve emancipation.

Within the Central-Eastern European context, author Zachariah Mampilly was recently invited to deliver a lecture at Budapest's Central European University – a sign that our region has picked up on this major global academic trend. Mampilly's activist links allow him access to a number of rebel leaders, civil society organisers and labour personalities (sometimes by clandestine means). His analysis is a radical departure from the Security Studies dominated North American/West European discourse on African rebel leaderships: Mampilly constitutes some of them as part of a potential

long term solution and not as security threats. With the US Africa Command now getting more and more entangled in local conflicts on the African continent, it is vital that voices independent of the US security architecture are also gaining recognition within global Africanist circles, and that their authentic voices are recognised even in Central-Eastern Europe.

Another important representative of labour oriented Africanist scholarship is London's Leo Zeilig: labour organiser, academic, writer, socialist, and prolific author. With especially Zeilig's fantastic recent works such as *Lumumba: Africa's Lost Leader*, *The Congo: Plunder and Liberation*, and his very own new take on Frantz Fanon, the Africanist community has again reconnected with 1960s and 1970s radical icons. Leo Zeilig's *oeuvre* has gone beyond such reconnection though. It has also been pivotal in explaining how under de-industrialisation, labour movements can still mount massive coordinated strikes that influence major political developments in Africa. In his *Revolt and Protest: Student Politics and Activism in Sub-Saharan Africa*, and in *Class Struggle and Resistance in Africa*, major explanations are offered as to how strikes are gaining in organisation and strength despite the systematic dismemberment of manufacturing industries under structural adjustment programmes (ongoing since the early 1980s along with privatisation and the elimination of parastatal companies in African states). It is crucial to understand that African labour thrives under conditions of de-industrialisation, while urbanisation itself marches on. This has created serious difficulties even for Marxist analysts of African societies: Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums* is testament to that. Leo Zeilig, in disagreement with Davis, explains how a lumpenised urban mass in the context of de-industrialisation still does *not* mark the end of labour resistance in Africa:

(...) to see ... instances of protest as simply spontaneous explosions of a slum dwelling multitude is nonsense. More often they are organized or semi-organized expressions of political dissidence... (...) Writers doubted whether bonds of solidarity and consciousness were strong enough for a 'real' working class to bring about social transformation, and suggested that the so-called working class was in any case excluded from other groups in society as 'an aristocracy of labour.' It is undoubtedly true that the formation of the working class has been characterised by a complex and often heterogeneous process of 'proletarianisation' in most parts of Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth century - from migrant labour in the mines in Southern Africa from the 1900s to labour in oil extraction and processing in the Niger delta from the 1970s. (Zeilig, 2002: 15)

Following this general discussion, Zeilig brings into the discussion the concrete example of Soweto in South Africa:

(...) the effects of mass unemployment - typical of the de-industrialised urban life in the South - have created a new class of the wage-less poor, excluded from the world of work. The working class seems now, by implication, a tiny and privileged group, many of whom live outside the township slum and have interests separate from the majority of the urban poor. However, a closer look

at the statistics reveals something quite different. If we examine the household, we can see extraordinary mixing of the different and seemingly divided groups of the poor. (...) There is no 'wall of China' between work and unemployment. (...) the potential for a similar crossover exists as regards popular protest and social dissidence. (Zeilig, 2002: 15-16)

What is important to realise in connection with Zeilig's argument is that a single man or woman in formal employment may be directly responsible for the physical survival of up to ten people who live in the same compound as the employee, or who receive from him or her remittances, and that the latter's own revolutionary potential will reflect very closely, the influence of their luckier brethren.

We should extrapolate on Zeilig's important point by bringing to the table the revolutionary potentialities of Europe's young *precariate*. Arguably, our own Eastern Europe's semi-peripheral *precariate* already lives on the very edges of physical survival if it does not emigrate. (Dale, 2011) Pointing out structural parallels between the fate of Africa under de-industrialisation, and Central-Eastern Europe under simultaneous dynamics of de-industrialisation and subaltern (neo-colonial) re-industrialisation will allow us to draw attention to understudied aspects of Eastern Europe's condition itself.

Afrikanizacija

In works that focus on de-industrialisation, or the critique of NGO paradigms of meaningless 'empowerment' and specifically also the failings of micro-credit systems in the former Yugoslavia, the term 'afrikanizacija' was introduced early on in the 1990s. 'Afrikanizacija' (a Serbo-Croat word that is frequently misspelled 'africanizacija' in Western literature) is a technical term for how a 'society in transition' (most especially one that had been based on a socialist economy before) is transformed relying on the informal sector of kiosks, street stalls, rehashed subsistence farms, (Lal, 2013: 156) and we may add, on widespread prostitution and criminalisation of its socio-economic and political life. Kiosk economies, informal economies, outright criminality and ubiquitous sex work characterised the 1990s all over Central-Eastern Europe, the former USSR, and the Balkans. They remain embedded in countries such as Ukraine, Bosnia, Macedonia or Moldova. (An interesting case study of Moldova is supplied by Keough, 2016). Relatively luckier new EU member states such as Hungary, with their growing geographical regions and pockets of Afrikanizacija, are also transmogrifying into neo-colonial style remittance economies (because of massive flows of intra-EU emigration). The wholesale supplying of low skilled physical labour by men and also physical and emotional labour by women (as nurses, caretakers, sex workers etc.) to the economies of the global centre brings to mind parallels with the Philippines and its similar role vis-a-vis the US, but also, parallels with economies such as that of Ethiopia (another well known source of nurses in the global market for emotional labour, in this case for the Persian Gulf). At the same time, while subsidiary re-industrialisation is considered a panacea by ruling elites, Afrikanizacija grows in relevance in sub-regions that are left out of that process.

In some ways however, Afrikanizacija stamps more than just Eastern Europe's under-researched, desperately poor hellholes. It may be said to characterise aspects of our entire developmental model. The near complete lack of unemployment benefits in Eastern Europe, the way in which tertiary education and secondary education expenses are cut back, the state of healthcare, and the wholesale destruction of entire segments of the middle class in our region (Atal, 1999; Dale, 2013) underline that Afrikanizacija has not been just a transitional phase: indeed that it should appear among the defining grand metaphors for our socio-economic system today. It is also here to stay. Understood this way, Afrikanizacija would not mean a return to some idyllic folk capitalism of the African jungle (a much touted but nonexistent historical phenomenon anyway) but the specifics of economic life in Africa after the brutal neo-liberal restructuring of the 1980s and the 1990s (and in some cases still ongoing) that artificially rid the African continent of much of its potential for growth and cemented its international economic role as a supplier of raw materials and super-exploited labour power.

Naturally, this is not to suggest that current skills levels in West Africa approximate skills levels in Eastern Europe or specifically in Hungary (skills levels in de-skilled and de-educated West Africa are startlingly low); but it is to suggest that these two distinct groups of economies are similar in that they cannot accommodate their very own highly skilled professionals any more - and neither can they accommodate their skilled workers. There are more Nigerian medical doctors practicing in the United States than there are within Nigeria (Falola and Heaton, 2008: 255). Trends in Hungary are similar: our medical doctors and nurses are leaving, along with our welders. Africa's structural adjustment programs and Eastern Europe's disastrous post-1989 transition have both resulted in the establishment of distinctly neo-colonial systems; and they both resulted in the destruction of entire embedded life-worlds, including much of the life-world of the urbanised Central-Eastern European intellectual that we ourselves as a sub-class so much cherish.

It has perhaps been easiest to notice the nature of (neo-) colonial rule in regions where legal sovereignty was also taken away, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina (an EU *protectorate* in name and substance). The highest political authority in that country is the foreign 'High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina,' the chief executive officer for the 'international civilian presence' (i.e. the Western colonial authority) in the country. Since 1995, the High Representative has been able to bypass the elected parliamentary assembly, and since 1997 has been able to remove elected officials. The methods selected by the High Representative have been criticised even in mainstream media as blatantly undemocratic. International supervision is planned to end when the country is deemed politically and democratically stable and self-sustaining - i.e. this is a typical colonial mandate (Hayden, 1998).

The BiH protectorate is also a textbook case of how the North-Western European core treats its South-Eastern European periphery: through de-industrialisation, privatisation, austerity; another well known example is Greece. It is not in the least surprising then that it was exactly in Bosnia that the most visible and most crucial multi-ethnic social revolt of the former Eastern European region has happened so far. The 2014 revolt started in Tuzla and spread to Sarajevo and Bihac, and was characterised by inter-ethnic inclusion and a complete lack of the supposedly

paramount ‘ancient hatreds’ that are thought to characterise the peoples of the region in the minds of the (neo-) colonial ruling authority. The demonstrators’ anger focussed on the (indigenous) political class. Although home grown, that class clearly represents no one, it maintains an apartheid (ethnically constructed) system, it is complicit in the destruction of industry, and it functions in complete disconnect from ordinary people’s lives as much as any similar colonial authority (such as warrant chiefs in the British colonial system a century ago) (Robertson, 2014).

Elsewhere, as in Hungary or Poland, legal sovereignty made the recognition of a neo-colonial political economy extremely difficult, although of course, there exist some (mostly marginalised) critical thinkers. While on the other end of the spectrum, delusional conspiracy theorists (distinguished also by their university positions and academic titles too in Eastern Europe) envision dark schemata of unspeakable ferocity and drama to great popular acclaim, the obvious reality of Hungary’s economy as characterised by neo-colonial assembly plants that produce profit for German firms, is blurred by the ongoing ‘high politics’ entertainment show that is played out with the European Union.

The idea that there is a necessary analytical link between conditions that prevail in Africa and Eastern Europe does not rest on superficial parallels but on real commonalities between the lives and conditions of Central European migrant workers, its *precariate* and its fourth estate on the one hand, and with the Fourth World of Africa’s destitute (including their migrants) on the other. The destruction of life-worlds, as an important element in understanding social change, is emphasised by Karl Polanyi when he discusses how colonialism uprooted traditional communities in Africa thus:

(...) institutions are disrupted by the very fact that a market economy is forced upon an entirely differently organized community; labour and land are made into commodities, which, again, is only a short formula for the liquidation of every and any cultural institution in an organic society. (...) Who for instance would care to deny that a formerly free people dragged into slavery was exploited, though their standard of life, in some artificial sense, may have been improved in the country to which they were sold as compared with that it was in their native bush? And yet nothing would be altered if we assumed that the conquered natives had been left free and not even been made to overpay the cheap cotton goods thrust upon them, and that their starvation was ‘merely’ caused by disruption of their social institutions. (Polanyi, 2001: 167)

In this centrally important passage, Karl Polanyi battles the idea that exploitation is merely a fact of numbers, prices, and nominal incomes. Similarly, Eastern European societies before 1989, in their ways of preserving pre-modern solidarities and in maintaining enforced (state run) ones, social and economic factors sometimes allowed for a more humane existence than (semi-)peripheral capitalism does in the same regions today: an obvious statement of fact but one that still carries shock value in Eastern European periodicals. It would of course be foolish to suggest that Eastern Europe’s state socialist societies were organic societies à la Polanyi in any sense – but then again, neither were *acephalous* African Igbo village communities really ‘organic’

in any other sense than not being subjected to the *diktats* of capital. It is also obviously the case that people in gainful employment earn much more today in dollar terms than in 1986 in Hungary (although they do not necessarily do so in Bosnia). However, numbers alone tell nothing of the system at work. 'It is the absence of the threat of individual starvation which makes primitive society, in a sense, more humane than the market economy, and at the same time less economic,' continues Polanyi, describing pre-colonial economic systems that relied on solidarity and shared food resources as a way of life (Polanyi, 2001: 172). Indeed we must realise that it is completely impossible to make sense of the Nigerian economy even in 2016 and even in its most urbanised realms such as Lagos, without the knowledge that identity communities support their members, neighbours support neighbours, blood relations and co-workers support relatives and comrades in ways that are absent from the West, but somewhat still familiar from the 'vertical villages' of socialist housing blocks of 1980s Bulgaria or 1960s Hungary where the wider sharing of food was still a socially relevant phenomenon. With the arrival of Eastern Europe's peculiarly vicious version of unregulated capitalism after 1989, such solidarities were eroded by economic rationales and global hegemonic morals reinforcing each other: making Hungarian immigrants in the West one of the saddest, most individualised groups that do not rely on comforting (pre-modern) group solidarities much.

In the 1970s, epistemic communities established important links between Eastern Europe and Africa, where the latter largely, was the recipient of technological transfers and also of ideas such as Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyite analysis, and state socialism. Lake Balaton's chief architect Polanyi went and designed Nigeria's Calabar's entire urban layout. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana employed two Hungarian economists (Nicholas Kaldor, Jozsef Bognar). Corvinus' own Tamas Szentes, who worked in Dar-es-Salaam was an inspiration for an icon of African Marxian political economy, Walter Rodney himself. Bulgaria built the National Theatre in Lagos. More importantly still, the USSR financed and underwrote labour movements for decades in African countries (I narrate a case of this phenomenon in my upcoming book on *Naija Marxism: Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria*) (Mayer, 2016). In this article, I claim that it is time for Eastern Europe's social scientists to acknowledge and engage with African social science: especially Walter Rodney (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*), but also with Bade Onimode, Edwin Madunagu, and others who have important insights into how neo-colonial economies function, along with the kinds of humiliations that people who live under neo-colonial systems have to endure when it comes to their welfare, culture and identity. Bade Onimode, an economist, wrote classical economic histories and studies on political economy in the orthodox Marxist-Leninist, East-European fashion, when he analysed Nigeria's development. His voluminous oeuvre is testament to the fact that such an approach, despite its obvious shortcomings, was not at all without value in the African context. The more heterodox Eskor Toyo, although a Polish educated economist himself, showed more sympathy towards Maoist solutions, the peasantry as the bearer of revolution, and alternative Marxian cultural criticism, based on an understanding for the need to decolonise thought, before decolonising economies. Edwin Madunagu went even further and explored Trotskyite options, set up a New Left style rural commune with his comrades in the jungle, and wrote extensively on the effects of the neo-colonial

condition on a Fanonian basis, with corresponding rage. Although rage itself might be a double edged sword for an analyst, it might create an entirely new vantage point. I claim that in Eastern Europe, treating our own regional identity and our own academic history as an exercise in failure and a morality tale for the West on how the Other is always wrong, is slavish, self-negating, and ultimately, degrading. It is only through a critical re-engagement with our own tragedies and successes that Eastern Europe might hope to overcome its apathy.

The necessity of academic identity politics

Ramon Grosfoguel of UC Berkeley (who seems to be acquiring some of his co-author Immanuel Wallerstein's towering global credibility within World Systems Analysis circles today) has drawn academia's attention to the importance of decolonising Southern epistemologies and also to the impossibility of the detached, universal, Western *God's eye view*: the recognition that mainstream social science is gendered and that it has geographical and racial underpinnings. The triumphant Westerner in Grosfoguel's narrative *exterminates* not only people and peoples (as in South and North America, Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania) but also entire indigenous knowledge structures, right after it subjugates a geographical region (Grosfoguel, 2011). The full subjugation of our own region to transnational capital happened only after 1989: the regression in our region in the field of Humanities and social sciences is palpable ever since then.

This statement must be tempered with the knowledge that before 1989, Eastern Europe was obviously not free either: most of the region lived under the thumb of Soviet state socialism. I consciously avoid discussing the ideological question whether the USSR was socialist or state capitalist: I do tend towards a version of the former opinion and thus employ the formula of state socialism. Slovak social scientists Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik presented an engaging collection of essays that focus on Eastern Europe's flight from under Moscow's iron fist in *Post-colonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, a very interesting compilation that merits discussion (Pucherova, 2015). The basic problem with the editors' thesis however, seems to me their lack of discussion on the political economy of Soviet empire. It is well known that the USSR controlled tightly, the kinds of domestic political economies that were tolerated or encouraged within its orbit. However, it is also well known that resource extractive classical colonialist/neo-colonialist methodologies were lacking to such an extent that the cost of maintaining Soviet Central Asia, or Central-Eastern Europe under COMECON, was a major reason behind the dissolution of the empire and the state itself; in other words, not only did the USSR not exploit most of its colonies economically but it usually lost resources on them. This is not to say that the colonial or post-colonial paradigm cannot be used in relation to our relationship with the Soviet Union; there may be reasons and parallels that warrant such treatment. However, what is entirely lacking from such a discussion is the realisation that in the economic sense, 1989 actually opened up Eastern Europe's economies, through shock therapies and brutal privatisation schemes, to Western capital, this time as a really integrated semi-

periphery/periphery, and that 1989, despite its calls for emancipation even for workers, was hijacked by neo-liberal elites and ended up transforming Eastern Europe into a neo-colony in the economic sense.¹ The region's case is special as the realisation of how legal sovereignty appeared exactly at the time when economic sovereignty was withdrawn, and that this fact made widespread realisation of what was happening very hard. It prevents still, a cultural awareness among elites and intellectual strata, of the region's neo-colonial condition, startlingly even when signs that point to neo-colonial realities are closest to researchers. Madina Tlostanova's exceptionally brilliant thesis in 'Can the Post-Soviet Think?' shows exactly this kind of realisation, where she not only talks of the subaltern position of post-Soviet researchers but the effects of double coloniality (Tlostanova, 2015).

Gabor Eross has focused on how sociology assumed a mere data provider function in Eastern Europe upon 1989 in an important article in *Intersections* – and I find this should be saluted (Eross and Bartha, 2015). In the field of History, raw data collection does not operate as a field independent of the conceptualisation of results; hence, entire self-orientalising narratives arrived after 1989 with intellectual mimicry, as modalities of individual survival for researchers. Eastern European social thought has to recognise that there can, and there should be, epistemologies specific to the region, which are markedly different from Western perspectives. We in Eastern Europe, and especially Central-Eastern Europe, including social science researchers, physically *look* like members of the dominant groups in Western academia, hence *academic identity politics* has been slow to emerge. It is possible for Hungarian historians to assume a quasi Western, American academic persona and identity. In such cases however, the authenticity of the voice might be questioned (Szalai, 2015). There have been cases where former celebrity historians of the region became unabashed apologists for the most triumphal US centred narratives. A disturbing example is Ivan T. Berend's trajectory: his last publication stressed the positive role that US companies had played in the rebuilding of Western Europe in openly celebratory ways – a real disappointment after his former well earned fame as an independent Marxist voice regionally (Berend, 2013).

The Eastern European Humanities scholar/Historian as academic migrant in the Atlantic world might, if he/she so chooses, build an entirely new intellectual persona and engage in what Rene Girard, the philosopher, calls 'acquisitive mimesis/appropriative mimicry:' not only in the sense of appropriating a better salary (an enticing prospect no doubt), but also of appropriating a vantage point, a tradition, a manner of weighing issues originally alien to the migrant academic. Girard warns us that mimicry is a violent process; in this case, most of the violence is done on the scholar's very own self.

Academic identity politics is not something that Eastern European Humanities and social sciences had to focus on formerly: regional output satisfied regional demand, and most of it remained within the region, or even within national discourses that happened in national vernaculars. However, academic globalisation that brought enhanced bonuses for publication in English versus national tongues, is forcing Eastern European analysts to face entirely new pressures of asserting group identities

¹ See, e. g. Gowan (1995)

within global linguistic mediums and discourses. The dynamic that in the 1970s started to characterise US academia (the increasing importance of academic identity politics from New Left to feminism, from Black approaches to Latino self assertion, from working class credentials to in-the-face religious statements) is today a global phenomenon. An academic persona today exists in a contested space where local and regional discourses interact with, but ultimately are also judged by, global hegemonic discourses in the Gramscian sense. No one will have the luxury of revelling in locally or regionally constituted discourses without being scaled by the watchful eye of a brutally competitive international discourse where unasserted regional standings do not carry currency except if they manage to make their mark on the global whole. Eastern European identities are as much historically constituted as most other ones: however, our physiognomy's similarity with Western academics' makes it difficult to revert to fashionable biopolitical explanations and racialist/ethnicist foci, when introducing our own *difference*. In our case, our identities as Eastern European researchers have to be based on what it is that we *say*, especially about our own history, and how we can move away from the slavish criminalisation of our own past that characterises Western scholarship about our region, and deal instead with our *significant unsaid*, our state socialist legacy in a critical and meaningful way as it offers insights into understanding universal questions. Following Grosfoguel, I claim that we must understand this: Our viewpoint may not be a *God's eye view* of universal rationalism – but neither are Western dominated universalisms really God's eye views – as epistemological universalism is today a blatant impossibility (Grosfoguel, 2011). If we assert the relevance of our regional historical experience instead of simply copying Western externalisations and orientalisms of it, we may do global discourse great service. From the Yugoslav experience on workers' self government to 1956's similar experiments, from state sponsored socialist feminisms to the way how pre-modern peasant identities enriched Eastern European cultures under state socialism and beyond, from the region's historical presence in Africa to the organised experiment at building a workers' state in the early USSR; all are achievements that Eastern European researchers and academics can be proud of and use when considering today's pressing social problems within and without, the Eastern European region. Our current status as providers of morality tales on how the West is always right, and how we ourselves are inferior, is an obvious *cul-de-sac* of thought.

What the dominant, hegemonic discourse does when it orientalises and ultimately dehumanises us Eastern Europeans played out for all eyes to see from around August 2015 in the region's refugee crisis, when instead of explaining how local political classes used the crisis to their own benefit (and as Gaspar Miklos Tamas points out [2015], as a misguided attempt to safeguard the sub-region's potential to export our labour to the West), academic heavyweights and light hearted media actors alike, portrayed Eastern European peoples and cultures as vicious, bigoted, ungrateful and evil: exactly the late 19th century image of 'the ungrateful savage of the Congo.' Participants in academic sub-rational discourses such as the 'Why We Study Eastern Europe' closed group on Facebook saw such opinions being promoted and played out, as when a British participant there 'joked' that 'Hungarian intelligence' was 'a contradiction in terms': a type of joke that after the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s in the United States, academics would never crack about African countries, and

naturally so. The regional governments' buffoonish reactions to these insults as they reached the region through mainstream media, were equally vindictive but missed entirely, the point of origin of this blame game; which is the bloated general superiority complex of Western (non-radical, capitalist) mainstreams vis-a-vis us 'Ossies,' and our recurring constitution in their eyes as (neo-) colonial sub-humans. The *ungrateful colonial subject* is particularly interesting here as it echoes exactly, established Western opinions on their own victims before about the Second World War in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Although it is obvious that Western corporations make much more money in Central-Eastern Europe than what the sub-region receives through structural funds from the EU; and thus that it is *us that aid Western development and not vice versa*, the (neo-) colonial Western (academic) mind seems to require the notion that its inferior should exude gratefulness for his/her fate.

It is important to note that although Western condescension, dismissal and discrimination against Eastern Europeans has been a major culture shock for most of our new immigrants in the UK (including workers and academics), those phenomena are not new at all: so much so that when Agatha Christie herself wanted to describe shoddy architecture, she made mention of a Hungarian hunting lodge. Bulgarians in a profoundly self-deprecating manner speak of 'bulgarskata prostotiya,' 'Bulgarian simplicity' – as if anyone could offer proof that the 'average' Dane or Briton is more 'complex' than the average Bulgarian (if such concepts have any meaning at all in the first place).

However, what is important here is not to advocate cultural neurosis, or a regional spin on anti-Western resentment and nationalism. A truly authentic answer to Western disdain or our own self-orientalising tendencies would be the celebration of our own *difference* from what constitutes the North-Western European mainstream, by way of embracing a multifaceted critical attitude to our own historical heritage. This should allow for solidarity with every single actor of good will in the West and would also allow us to present ourselves with a pride that has been lacking to a large extent in the last thirty years. Pride in suffering and oppression is naturally something that Black thinkers know much about: hence my insistence that the African experience is very relevant for us.

Radical History as an identity builder in Eastern Europe

Eastern European epistemologies with wider and especially global influence have been few and far between. Successful meta-theories or popular commentaries on the human condition that emanate from our region have been truly rare. Eastern Europe has *not* been the ground source for major world religions, and has not generally excelled in philosophy (our record is better when it comes to the hard sciences, and also literature, music, and art in general).

An obvious exception to our relatively inconspicuous existence in the global history of ideas has happened at the intersection of Marxist theory and practice: Lenin, Trotsky, Dunevskaya, Lukacs, Djilas have not only managed to alter the course of history within Eastern Europe but also provided the impetus for global

applications of the vanguard (Bolshevik) party (from the PRC through North Korea and non-Communist South Korea to Taiwan at least as an organisational principle for parties such as the KMT), and Eurocommunism and Western Marxisms (in the case of Lukacs). Original liberal, libertarian and conservative thinkers have been less numerous in the region, and even ‘perennialist philosophies’ of the ultra right that are so fashionable in today’s Eastern Europe, originated in France, Switzerland and Italy (Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and Julius Evola are to blame for Putin’s court philosopher Alexander Dugin and the Jobbik-enamoured ‘perennialist thinkers’ that hail from Debrecen in Southern Hungary today). In a curious way, no major new religion ever sprang up from our wider region: Hussites or Transylvanian Unitarians have not become important players in spiritual fields of human imagination, and Eastern Orthodoxy had also been largely a Byzantine invention.

A notable recent exception to that general rule has been the world of the Satmar rabbinical dynasty that grew out of a minute community under Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum and has managed to attract a significant following in the US with its message of celebrating both age old Judaic tradition *and* the world and customs of 19th century pre-industrial Satmar. This is an example of an ossified knowledge structure that consciously disengages from its immediate environment but one, which has provided solace for victims of specifically US kinds of social and psychological alienation for its followers. I claim this as most of Joel Teitelbaum’s *hassidim* in the United States were not survivors of his own original *kahal* in Satmar but *baal tshuva*, new converts, from various secularised and semi-secularised strata of US Jewry (most with some links to the Eastern European region though).

Eastern Europe’s sometimes insular epistemologies and exclusivist public ethos has come to light recently with the refugee crisis and the Hungarian, Slovak, Slovene, and Polish reaction to it – also highlighting the dangers implicit in historically focussed world views. History and historical world views are thus capable of exerting both benign psychological influence amid the terror of global capitalist accumulation and its onslaught on human integrity (as in the case of Satmar in the US that provides comfort and identity amid a hyper-competitive and thus dehumanised environment – as a matter of fact Satmar is also well known for its kindly gestures towards Palestinians everywhere) or, as harbingers of extreme inhumanity politically (as in the case of the use of history in the region’s refugee crisis by the region’s governments in 2015).

Simon Winder’s *Danubia* is probably the most accessible popular work on Central and Central-Eastern European (Habsburg) history that appeared in print in this decade. Winder sums up the dangers of History in CEE thus:

The extraordinarily toxic legacy of the Empire’s obsession with linguistics, archaeology, ethnography, sigillography, numismatics, cartography and so on, makes me feel in my darker moods, that the spread of these subjects and the use to which they were put was nothing but a disaster for Central Europe and that academics more than anyone else are (with help from priests) one of the greatest villains. Indeed, in comparison with academics, the politicians and military men were mere puppets, with even Hitler simply a disgusting by-product of various Viennese nationalist and scientific teachings. / The stakes

have been so high because each linguistic group has obsessively picked over its past not merely out of a wish to entertain itself with fancy-that facts about ancestors, but to use it as the key weapon in establishing its ascendancy over other groups (Winder, 2013: 5-6).

Winder seems somewhat naive, or averse to theory, when he ascribes such powers to the ancillary subjects of History or to History itself. After all, Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner spent significant parts of their respective oeuvres on explaining the structural causes for why fervent nationalisms had to appear exactly in CEE (and why History and historians often had to be conjurers of myths) (Hobsbawm, 2012; Gellner, 2008).

However, although it is hard to neatly tell apart and separate narratives from myths (if not on the basis of forensic factual truths), and although our former convictions have waned in the sense that the ‘scientific method’ may be demarcated easily from myth-making due to classical Marxist understandings about the nature and laws of History; and although our general positivist outlook has been shattered and questioned by numerous post-modernist takes, it is still important to recognise that all narratives are *not* equal in their causal strengths, in their intellectual outlook, and in their capacity to act as tools, especially in relation to any praxis that takes as its reference point, the disenfranchised. Few historians in Eastern Europe have retained any interest in the fate of working class people, agricultural labourers, (especially lower class) women, the unemployed and the precariate in our region after 1989. Pride in striving, effort, and suffering is more difficult to achieve than pride in the glitzy past of regional capitalism but ultimately, it will be more rewarding and decidedly more realistic.

Corporate tyrannies and the global imperative to avoid them

I claim that in order for Eastern European epistemologies to revitalise and regain strength, it is central to reconnect with conceptions of class as well as any other conceptual framework that may be of use to agendas of emancipation, as opposed to ‘weapons establishing ascendancy.’ In a new kind of humility, it may be important to reconnect with African labour movements and with the social science that explains them, but in this case in the new and unfamiliar role of recipient. African social thought has largely been triggered by the colonial and neo-colonial condition with its economic, social, political and cultural implications. Their insight into how colonialism works may enrich not only social science but also social action and activism.

The historical focus that characterises our own Eastern European epistemologies and world views, may furnish us not only with narrative strengths in the sense of art, as in the case of high literature, but also with analytical tools to address problems of social change. The first source, as always, should be closest to home: it should pour from our own historical experience. Africa’s neo-colonial past and present may offer us a parable on how corporate capitalism destroys societies: indeed as Africa’s extraction economies and low skilled industries thrive under systems of

corporate tyranny, governments there act as literal agents of the representatives of transnational capital. This landscape may act as potent warning to the historically conscious: corporate tyranny is one possible scenario for the future of Eastern Europe.

Examples that draw exactly such a startling picture of the future abound already. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, which has been in the news for months in early 2016, is thought to include the possibility of corporations' suing national governments when the latter's regulations harm the former by incurring 'lost profit.' Such a right, when given to corporations, would undermine the ability of national governments, intergovernmental organisations and also the EU's supranational agencies to resist the *diktats* of capital, as is the general rule in Africa. Thus, I claim that it is not in some distant or remote future where a structural convergence of Central-Eastern Europe's largely semi-peripheral economies and the peripheral economies of Africa may occur. Given the accelerated rate of change associated with the 21st century, this may happen much sooner than we are wont to think. Studying African social thought of the 1980s or Gramscian African thinkers of the early 2000s (such as Usman Tar) should not be viewed as a weird antiquarian occupation or an exotic indulgence: it should have direct implications for our very own social theory.

Endre Sik² (Shiik)'s scholarship on Africa has been much ridiculed recently in Eastern Europe and beyond, for serving an obvious ideological purpose as it had set the tone for Soviet African Studies for generations – as if the *Cambridge History of Africa* served no ideological purpose beyond the love of knowledge for knowledge's sake... However, expository, exotic and antiquarian interests that manifest in superbly meticulous studies are also there for us to celebrate and build on, as immediate forerunners of a possible new Eastern European Africa scholarship: in Hungary Gabor Bur, Istvan Kende, Gyozo Lugosi, and Mihaly Sarkany's works on History, Security, and Social Anthropology in Africa have provided ample exposure to movements of emancipation already, on the African continent. On that basis, it would be a befitting and rather grand task for today's generation to show how in the brave new neo-colonial world of global capitalism, 'the bell tolls also for us' – while providing us with tools that in the Marxian sense, might help us shape our own identity, and form our own consciousness.

A note on our current state of knowledge

Naturally, all this has yet to amount to quantifiable, neat, positivist descriptive analysis within the framework of the author's long term research agenda. At this stage, we are armed with a recognition, a number of metaphors, and the notion that our sensibilities in Eastern Europe and within the Central-Eastern European sub-region, should

² Not to be mistaken with the contemporary Hungarian sociologist, Endre Sik. Shiik comes from the Russian transcription of his name since he worked until the mid 1940s in the Soviet Union. He is the author of the 4-volume *History of Black Africa*. He was the founder of the Soviet scholarship on Africa. See: Matusевич, (2003).

realign with important work that has been done and is being done, in the global South, notably including Africa. Quantitative analyses of the convergence between Eastern Europe and Africa and the comparative uncovering of their respective political economies may come at a later stage in this process. By way of presenting parallels, this article hopes to increase appreciation of an understudied and almost forgotten branch of human inquiry (African radicalism) and points out how engagement with that branch may reinvigorate our own receptivity, sensitivity and difference. The material for this article has largely been based on the author's research for his forthcoming monograph *Naija Marxisms: Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria* (Mayer, 2016) where a reassessment of 20th century Marxist theory in that country is supplied. The lessons of that research included how Marxism in Africa did not represent a rootless foreign ideology, but from the 1960s onwards, presented adequate analyses, and supplied answers and alternatives, to the ever more startling realities that African intellectuals had to confront. The claim of my present article is similar: While it is natural that radical analysis has to spring out of the analysis of local conditions in any given region, it is also necessary to engage with theory produced elsewhere, to make use of comparative opportunities and a plethora of analytical ideas that originate in another region of the world. Specifically, this article also identifies a problem of attitudes in Eastern Europe where self-negation in the intellectual sense has been internalised to such a degree that it makes sense for us to re-engage with the very notions of pride and dignity. Especially under conditions of suffering and dislocation, this is very difficult. In this sense especially, it has tremendous value for us to learn to engage with what Africa has to offer in the vein of African radical movements for emancipation. Today, the emancipation of the Eastern European social scientist and humanities scholar happens mostly by way of individual mimicry and adjustment when subtle shades of accommodation to Western demands are self-engineered by participants. This is exactly the way of the colonial subject, uncovered by Frantz Fanon at the onset of Algerian independence half a century ago. Today, the realisation that Eastern Europe is under neo-colonial exploitation triggers ultra-right reactions exactly because of the lack of awareness for global parallels and the marked lack of global solidarity that characterises our region to a unique degree. It is the recognition of this article that we may discover ourselves in the image of today's and yesterday's radical African, and that such a recognition will help us regain not only our own solidarity and humanity but also our self-respect and pride.

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