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POSTCOLONIALISM /POSTCOMMUNISM: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES: THE ROMANIAN CASE¹

Keywords: *communism, postcommunism, colonialism, postcolonialism, semi-colony, mimicry, nationalism, de-colonization*

Abstract: *The paper starts by showing that the liminality and hybridity that Bhaba finds characteristic of the postcolonial subject also perfectly illustrates the situation in postcommunist states. An awareness of both similarities and differences between colonialism and communism leads to categorizing the situation of the Central and East European satellite countries of the Soviet Union as semi-colonies, whereas the Baltic states, the Republic of Moldova and all the other non-Russian republics of the “union”(administrative units of the “Empire” with Russian as their official language) could be regarded as colonies.*

The paper sets out to demonstrate that none of the countries of the socialist bloc were really independent politically or economically: The military Pact of Warsaw and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – CMEA – were the tools that enforced the total control of Moscow and the dependence of the satellite socialist countries on Moscow was unconditional, at least in the first period, including the 1950s. As in all colonies, there was resistance against the enforced political, economic and ideological colonisation in Romania. And the paper dwells on partisan resistance in the Carpathians against the communist regime and the prisons were crammed with people who did not approve of the line of the Communist Party.

Then the process of mimicry is analyzed and Ceaușescu’s national communism. Postcolonial studies depicting nationalism as the defining feature of decolonization, the period after 1960 could be ranked as one of partial decolonization, initiating the process that was to culminate with the toppling of the communist regimes in the former satellite countries in 1989 and the implosion of the USSR in 1991.

The paper also draws a brief parallel between the double colonization, oppression and marginalization of women in both spaces under discussion and concludes with aspects of neocolonialism in postcommunist countries.

The initial chronological meaning of the term postcolonialism, used to designate the post independence period of former colonies, has been expanded since the 1990s and is used more inclusively to refer to the study of “the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies beginning from the time of their colonisation” (Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts* 186). According to the same authors, the term includes the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the institutions of European colonial powers, the discursive operations of empires, subject construction in

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¹ This article is part of the research project *Postcolonialism/Postcommunism: Dictionary of Key Cultural Terms* (PN-II-ID-PCE-2008, contract no. 789/2009 , code 2089

colonial discourse, the resistance of those subjects and finally, “the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nations and communities”. (Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts* 187)

The term postcommunism was introduced in 1989 when revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe toppled the communist regimes in seven countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania), a process completed by the dismantlement of the USSR in 1991 when 18 former Soviet republics declared their rejection of communism, as well as their commitment to democratic political models and free market economy. As Rodica Mihăilă remarks, in the case of postcommunism, the term marks not only a chronological sequence but also an “in-between-ness”, a transition from a totalitarian political and economic system based on a centralized, state-owned economy and the suppression of individual freedoms by the absolute authoritarian rule of the one-party state and the all embracing ideology of Marxism-Leninism to a not yet reached democratic society (Mihăilă 133). The liminality and hybridity that Bhaba finds characteristic of the postcolonial subject who hovers in a space between colonial discourse and a new “non colonial” identity (Bhaba 1994: 4) also perfectly illustrates the situation in postcommunist states where the long- term effects of communism could not be eradicated over the night and the new European identity has taken, or is still taking, various spans of time to materialize in admission to NATO (2005 in the case of Romania), to the European Union (2007 for Romania) or to other European organisms and institutions.

It is interesting that, although postcommunist studies programmes were initiated at various American and West European universities, they went in parallel with the post colonial ones without any points of intersection. Leslie Holmes, for instance, offers in his *Postcommunism. An Introduction* (1997) a comparative thorough exploration of this space based on the communist heritage of all former communist states, their comprehensive attempts at transition and the global context of this process (Holmes 15-21, Mihăilă 141). The explanation lies in the fact that the Three-World diagram that Postcolonial Studies initially relied on was of Marxist inspiration, regarding the First World as the agent of the Third World ills and exploitation and the Second World or socialist bloc as the alternative to be struggled for. When the Second World collapsed in 1989 and 1991, the theorists were somewhat at a loss as they were left without a teleological term of reference, their confusion resulting in silence, a strategic avoidance of approaching this space that had suddenly changed its signified. As David Chioni Moore opines:

It is still difficult, evidently, for three-world-raised postcolonial theorists to recognise within the Second World its postcolonial dynamic. In addition, many postcolonial scholars, in the United States and elsewhere, have been Marxist or strongly left and therefore have been reluctant to make the Soviet Union a French or British-style villain. (Moore 522)

And some of the supporters of the communist utopia have even tried to maintain that the Marxist proposition is still theoretically valid; it was only its translation into practice that had been wrong (indeed, a translation that did take a toll of millions of victims). It is hard for one to understand how they can still acclaim a system that glorifies dictatorship, even if it be the dictatorship of the proletariat.

On the other hand, the similar reluctance of scholars, particularly in the European Postcommunist states, of recognising that the postcolonial concepts might be a profitable tool in approaching the situation in their countries can be explained first and foremost by their “cultural and national self-pride” (Martin 3), their conviction that they belong to peoples that are radically different from the Third World ones, even though their situations might be somewhat similar. Moore subtly underscores that postcolonial desire in the post Soviet space “fixates not on the fallen master Russia but on the glittering Euramerican MTV-and Coca-Cola beast that broke it” (Moore 523). It is a desire to return to what was once theirs and these states repeatedly assert their Western affiliations and are therefore not eager to adopt an approach which vilifies the West.

However, a number of Romanian intellectuals (with correspondents in the neighbouring countries and elsewhere) are keen on exposing the true face of Soviet domination, its true imperialist nature. We are perfectly aware of the plurality of local differences the forms of communist oppression took in the region, but we think that the postcolonial approach has the right tools for revealing the isotopic aspect of Western imperial political and cultural oppression and economic exploitation and that of the *Red Empire* (to employ the title that the directors Mike Dormers and Jill Marshall used in 1990 for their TV documentary miniseries, which offered a thorough and intelligent summary of Soviet history). Perhaps we should emphasize from the beginning that we do not adopt a homogenizing gaze, and being conscious not only of the similarities between colonialism and communism, but of the differences too, we are going to categorize the situation of the Central and East European satellite countries of the Soviet Union as *semi-colonies*, contrary to the Baltic states, the Republic of Moldova and all the other non-Russian republics of the “union”, which were administrative units of the “Empire” with Russian as their official language” (Lefter 118). We should therefore make a distinction between the total cultural, economic and political colonialism that the USSR exercised in Central Asia and Siberia and appreciate that Soviet imperialism did not go equally far in Central and Eastern Europe, it was a political, cultural and economic colonization that did not amount to total integration or sovietization. One of the tough means of introducing and enforcing absolute long-term control over these “integrated” territories was ethnic cleansing and deportation of huge numbers of people as happened in Bessarabia (the part of Moldavia which was ripped off Romania following the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in 1940), where tens of thousands of persons were dislocated to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the far East. Also, the great famine of 1932-33 was a natural disaster used by the communist rulers to get rid of 4 million undesirable Ukrainians.

On the other hand none of the countries of the socialist bloc were really independent politically or economically. The military Pact of Warsaw and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – CMEA – were the tools that enforced the total control of

Moscow. In 1946 the Soviet tanks ensured the possibility of the electoral fraud that brought the communist regime in Romania and also in the other countries (with the exception of Czechoslovakia where the elections were fair). The Soviet Union used the military occupation to impose a change of institutional structures and of values. Everything was subordinated to ideology (allegiance to the Party), the absolute criterion in all fields, the economic one included. If in Bulgaria all intellectuals were shot on 9 September 1945, in Romania after the king was forced to abdicate and all the economic enterprises were nationalized, the old intellectuals were marginalized. The principle underlying Soviet imperialism was homogenising the countries encompassed by its sphere of influence (read military control) by the ideology of communist property over the means of production and proletarian internationalism. The late 1940s and the early 1950s witnessed an enforced introduction of Soviet power in Central and Eastern Europe, which it took decades to Western Europe to see for what it was: an extremist totalitarian regime that Orwell had warned against. Lenin and Stalin had the ingenious idea of concealing its imperialist nature by theoretically formulating the necessity of the proletariat's dictatorship. I think we can state that any totalitarian power is a colonizing power, and the direction in which the Soviet power went was against the Russian people first, where a fraction of the people brutally colonised the whole state, contrary to the situation in Western empires where the English or the French, etc. were always in a subject position.

The number of people exterminated in the Soviet Union in the period of Stalin's great terror and purges (1937-1953) is hard to estimate. For the people arrested and deported figures vary between 18 to 30 million and a number of 3 to 6 million were simply lost track of ("Gulag (Labour Camps, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) – Britannica Online Encyclopedia").

The dependence of the satellite socialist countries on Moscow was unconditional, at least in the first period, including the 1950s. All political decisions were taken in Moscow, and there was a Soviet Commissar in the government that vigilantly made sure that these decisions were carried out by servile autochthonous rulers both as regards the foreign policy and the domestic one, as for instance Ana Pauker, the woman commissar in the Soviet army that was a former member of the Comintern, was vice prime minister and the state Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1948-1952. This is more in keeping with Lord Durham's recommendation of self-government for the British North American colonies of Upper Canada and Lower Canada, for domestic social peace in the colonies and the efficient control of the British Crown (The Durham Report, 1838). Thus the Red Centre could ensure the exploitation of all resources and technical means in the satellite countries to its profit, a feature of all cases of economic colonisation. The Soviet army did not leave the territory of these states until 1991, with the exception of Romania, where it left in 1958 (as a consequence of the country's geographical position of having a panoptic wall of "sister" socialist countries all around).

As in all colonies, there was resistance against the enforced political, economic and ideological colonisation in Romania. There was partisan resistance in the Carpathians against the communist regime and the prisons were crammed with people who did not

approve of the line of the Communist Party; about 2 million people were put in prison between 1946 -1964, with - or even without - the parody of a trial that was the current practice. ("Comisia Prezidențială Pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste. Raport Final 2006") The torturing and humiliating practices used in the penitentiaries of Pitesti, Gherla and Canal labour camp for "re-educating" (read brain washing) the prisoners and recasting them into the mould of the "new man" were inspired by the subtext of Anton Makarenko's "pedagogical" principles, also implemented by the inmates who had "assimilated" them. Makarenko's *The Pedagogical Poem*, a fictionalized story of the Gorky corrective labour camp expounded his methods of education and rehabilitation of the individual by selfmanaging collectives of young delinquents. The individual was punished by his peers, which roused aggressive and antagonistic feelings within the inmate group. Makarenko stated that he allegedly disapproved of physical punishment. However he authored the principle of reeducation by fellow inmates and "Romania was used by the masters in Moscow as a testing ground for a type of brainwashing activity" perpetrated by fellow political prisoners. The prison authorities were officially blind, but actually encouraged the bestial use of physical violence the "reeducators" inflicted upon their victims: incessant pounding, thrashing, flogging as well as apparently less lethal methods like palm or sole flogging or beating the victims with a rod on the head until the victims lost consciousness were revived with buckets of water and the torture was resumed until the victims were practically driven insane with the pain. Forms of symbolic or verbal torture were also practised to make the victims renege on their devotion to family, friends, religion and king until total depersonalisation (Surdulescu 61-3). Mircea Martin sees political imprisoning, house arrest, the spoliation of thousands of people of their lands and property as enforcing a sort of Apartheid (10). He asserts that we can state that the Soviet power was much worse than the Western type of colonial power as it was not limited to the political, economic or social level, but extended to the level of the individual's right to free thought and expression (Martin 9).

It is noteworthy that in 1997, Alexander *Soljenytsin* wrote a letter to the Minister of Public Information in the Ciorbea Cabinet with the proposal that Romania should host the international trial of communism as it was in this country where, in proportion to its population, the communist repressive apparatus had taken its heaviest toll (Ilieșiu - Unpublished Interview with Sorin Bottez).

Although the communist discourse was rooted in an egalitarian theory, that did away with racial differences and class inequalities. In the late 1940s and the 1950s all national cultural traditions had to be supplanted by the superior Russian cultural models where communist ideology and class consciousness were the lay gospel, just as, in the colonies, the imperial culture was declared superior and superimposed on the local cultural traditions.

Even if Russian was not imposed as the official language in Romania as in the sovietized republics, it was introduced as compulsory subject in schools, even though with little success because of the strong psychological resistance of the students. Moreover; there were massive translations from Russian made through a special publishing house (Cartea rusa/ The Russian Book) and Romanian was declared a Slavic

language; in Bessarabia Romanian was officially changed into “the Moldavian language”, through an obvious process of “Othering”, that served the interests of the Centre; the educational system was modelled on the Soviet one (reduced to 10 years of study); national history was rewritten and Mihail Roller’s became the only official version. Under his supervision the Soviet-Romanian textbook of history was published in 1947 (“Istoria României”). Grounded in Marxist-Leninist theory, it served as an instrument of communist propaganda and indoctrination.

Proletarian internationalism was used by the Red imperial power to ensure its hegemony within the socialist countries bloc with the aim of ideological homogenization bracketed with de-nationalizing Central and Eastern Europe. However, after Gh. Gheorghiu’s death in 1964 we may deem that a certain process that may be assimilated with one of decolonization started in Romania, gathering impetus after the attack on Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Stalin’s death in 1953, the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union -1956, the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Romania in 1957 had already contributed to a change in the quality and degree of the Soviet oppression). Mircea Martin perceives it as a first symptom of decolonization in Central and Eastern Europe, contrary to the situation in the Soviet republics (Martin 15, 16). But it was of course only a partial decolonization, in the economic and cultural fields, as the political grip of Moscow was as strong as ever. It occurred however with the acquiescence of the imperial centre, which, nevertheless, did not tolerate it to go too far, as the invasion of Czechoslovakia testifies.

I think that the postcolonial concept of *mimicry* is quite useful in describing what happened in Romania under Ceaușescu. He may be regarded as a “mimic man”, who reproduces the colonizing subject “but not quite”, mimicry being “at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 86). Mimicry makes colonial culture “always potentially and strategically insurgent” (Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts* 141). Ceaușescu introduced and wallowed in the cult of his personality, that, however, did not vie from the imperial political discourse of Marxism – Leninism, that being the “resemblance” aspect. Yet it had a marked anti-Soviet feature. He also initiated a cultural counterpart to it, the so called *protochronism*, which was a subversive element to the Soviet imperial cultural discourse, representing the “menace”. The mass phenomenon of *Cântarea României/ Hymn to Romania* was added to the media indoctrination campaign radiating from such intellectuals as Eugen Barbu, C.V. Tudor, Adrian Păunescu, Pompiliu Marcea, Edgar Papu grouped round periodicals like *Săptămâna*, *Luceafărul*, and daylies like *Scântea* and *Scântea Tineretului*. Exalting nationalist values they promoted the triumphal myth of a superior nativeness and opposed Western values and cosmopolitan theories like Lovinescu’s *Synchronism*. It generally glorified the Dacians and Thracians as our ancestors that had had an overwhelming impact on European culture and civilization. (Many of its supporters are even now active journalists or widely present, even if contested, public figures like Vadim Tudor and Păunescu, who were members of the Romanian Parliament (Păunescu until his death in 2010, and CV Tudor until he was elected a member of the European Parliament in 2009)

In its equal rejection of cultural contacts with the West and the Soviet East and its glorification of autochthonous culture, this phenomenon meets the description that Kyosseff makes of Bulgarian culture, proposing the concept of self-colonization to define it:

Thus, in the genealogical knot of the Bulgarian national culture there exists the morbid consciousness of an absence - a total, structural, non-empirical absence. The Others - i.e. the neighbors, Europe, the civilized World, etc. possess all that we lack; they are all that we are not. The identity of this culture is initially marked, and even constituted by, the pain, the shame - and to formulate it more generally - by the trauma of this global absence. The origin of this culture arises as a painful presence of absences and its history could be narrated, in short, as centuries-old efforts to make up for and eliminate the traumatic lacks. I wonder whether it is not possible to call such cultures self-colonising? (Kyosseff, "Notes on the Self-Colonising Cultures")

On the other hand postcolonial studies have depicted nationalism as the defining feature of decolonization, and we have already ranked the period after 1960 as one of partial decolonization, initiating the process that was to culminate with the toppling of the communist regimes in the former satellite countries in 1989 and the implosion of the USSR in 1991.

Ceaușescu's catastrophic political, economic and cultural policies led to a total isolation of his regime and made his overthrow inevitable. This was performed by another "mimic man", Ion Iliescu, whose formation had been accomplished in Moscow, the Imperial metropolis. However his imperial model was no longer Stalin or Mao but that of Gorbachev, the promoter of the reformed communism of Perestroika or "communism with a human face". Yet, his coup had to go much farther than he had intended because of the masses of desperate protesters in the streets who chanted "Down with Communism!" About 1000 young people laid down their lives in order to overthrow the communist regime. Romanians paid a heavy price to conquer their right to freedom, to the fundamental human rights that had become the birthright of the citizens of Western democracies.

After December 1989 Romania has become the site of many competing political discourses, some recuperating Romania's pre World War II (actually pre 1938) democratic Western orientation. We can draw a parallel with the decolonization of the post World War II period which saw the disintegration of the colonial empires under the national movements of liberation. In the newly independent countries the struggle for a new cultural affirmation of the former colonised peoples began with a reclaiming of their own pre-colonial past, as the French political writer Frantz Fanon shows in his influential work *Les Damnés de la terre / The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

On the other hand, other competing discourses adapted the former nationalist communist jargon, some internalizing and reiterating the denigrating stereotypes of the West cast in the part of an exploiting and decadent Other, others singing/bugling the former proto-chronist peans to Romanian culture.

The effects of the Soviet colonization could not disappear over the night in December 1989. The 1990s can be defined as one of “filtered colonialism”, a concept that Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek develops in order to describe the Soviet colonialism of Central and Eastern Europe.

(Soviet colonialism is) a type of colonialism that manifested itself in a secondary colonization through ideological, political, social, cultural and other means during *and after* a forty –year period of colonialism. Filtered colonialism is to be understood as a result of and following the primary colonization, as a penetration and imprint of cultural processes and behaviour. (Tötösy De Zepetnek 8)

Thus the crypto-communism of Romania’s first post-communist president Ion Iliescu and his party, though concealed by his public discourse of implementing political pluralism and a market economy can be demonstrated by one illustrative example : the Constitution of 1990 protected but did not guarantee private property. The text was revised to that effect only in 2003. And it was high time because the former communist elite had amassed huge fortunes. They had gladly let themselves colonized by the capitalist discourse, the opposite of their former ideology. They often became part of neo-colonial enterprises such as international corporations. Martin Beck Matušík describes the process with bitter irony as follows:

Enter brave new multiculturally inverted corporate worlds- doubly inverted. Not much needs to be altered on the facades of the state Party to make over its face into a Corporation. The same old political and secret-agent cadres, their buildings and dirty money, can be laundered with the transition to democracy. A Party boss retools to a new corporate CEO [Chief Executive Officer], a party retreat house opens freshly as a resort hotel, the Party five – year planning adapts to the equally dogmatic IMF corporately controlled “free markets”, old mafias transform into legitimately prospering companies or they perfect themselves as new mafias... To illustrate, Havel warns that *nomenklatura* bosses laugh now at the same workers for whom the promised paradise has been lost, better robbed, twice. (Matušík 110)

In Romania too, former prominent figures of the communist apparatus and their families are now multimillionaires, owners of thriving businesses. In Romania too, as in all the other former countries of the communist bloc, there emerged new elites intent upon their predatory project , which Venelin Ganev calls ”extraction from the state” (Ganev 10), whereas in the classic context of decolonization the “extraction” is , as in the process of state building described by Charles Tilly “a series of predatory acts unleashed upon subordinate populations”, plus “a set of interactions - involving large constituencies – that eventually may crystallize in reproducible institutional framework of governance” (Ganev 9). On the other hand many Romanians perceive the Western countries as a new imperial centre within the EU, rivals to the US in their use of an economic neocolonialism (see the Roşia Montană project of Gabriel Resources, a Canadian multi-national corporation interested in gold extraction) as well as a cultural neocolonialism.

The situation of women under communism regimes and subsequently in the postcommunist years is a vast area of research by itself. I would only like to mention just one intersection: in spite of the fact that right from its inception the communist regime proclaimed that liberty, gender equality and the emancipation of women were main targets in the development of the new society, mentioned in all official documents, the Constitution included, women were only thrown into the labour force but in low paying jobs and forced to participate in political activities, which amounted very close to that double colonization, oppression and marginalization that women were subjected to in colonial societies (the general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women, as maintained by such critics as Spivak, Mohanty, Suleri, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin). Gender equality proclaimed by the regime as well as special measures such as free day-care for children and maternity leaves were used to assist women in their double gender roles, rather than to reorganize gender responsibilities between men and women. There was a great discrepancy between proclaimed principles and actual social practice, which made many Eastern European women refer to previous state policies as “false equality” and “forced emancipation” (Einhorn 148). What had been thought of as emancipation soon turned out to be a reinforcement of the traditional division of labour, and resulted into a triple burden for women: the household and children, work outside the home, a compulsory participation in political life. Mihaela Miroiu describes this period thoroughly calling the process “emancipation through work and state patriarchy²” (Miroiu 185-207). During Dej’s regime abortion was free and, following the Stalinist model, the family as an institution was under attack for demolition.

Ceausescu’s Party instituted the state control over the family and woman’s body when in 1966 abortion was declared illegal, with devastating effects for women, for whom unwanted pregnancies frequently led to their death or to abandoned children with handicaps. As Zoe Petre has underlined this criminalization of abortion, which took place in no other socialist country, led to what may be termed as a Party and State rape (Petre 265). Throughout the 50 year communist period we can speak of a war of annexation of the female condition and through it of the most intimate resources of civil society. A first period of institutional hatred and patent repression was followed by a second period of latent oppression which continued the typically totalitarian process of introducing public control over private life, of annihilating the family and domesticating woman’s condition (Petre 270).

Under the Ceausescu regime under the impetus of Elena Ceausescu’s personal ambitions there was a renewed promotion of women, which amounted at the most, for instance, to a 24% of the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, but the general impact was a renewed general hatred of female ambition.

After the overthrow of the communist regime in 1989 there was a resurgence of the patriarchal mentalities of the traditional Romanian society, of gender stereotypes according to which women sell sex, youth, beauty whereas men sell brains and muscles.

² See also Vasile Vese’s article.

As Daniela Frumusani points out, women as sex objects are promoted by the advertising inflation and the market economy pressures. Comparatively with men, women are younger, with an insecure social and occupational anchorage, important by their corporeality, presence, relational qualities, not in the least by authority or expertise. (2002:17-65) There are some civic NGOs that try to awaken an awareness of gender issues, but stereotypes die hard.

In postcommunism, women have gradually become more dependent on men because of market economy as well as state policies regarding budget allocation: there is much more funding for secret services, army and police, than for the more “feminized” fields of education, health care and administration. We can also speak now of a “feminization” of poverty, as many women are giving up professional satisfactions and adopting “survival strategies”.

As in many postcolonial societies there are several Romanian NGOs that do their best to raise consciousness about essential aspects of women’s actual condition in this country and to promote and struggle for non-discriminatory treatment of women

The author hopes that by sketchily enumerating a few points where certain aspects of colonial/postcolonial and communist/post-communist societies intersect, the present paper has convincingly managed to demonstrate that the latter field may really benefit from employing the theoretical tools and concepts of the latter.

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