

Postcolonialism Unveiled: At the Nexus of Scientific Inquiry and Political Discourse

Interview with Richard Tempest

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*The conversation was conducted by Sergey Markedonov,
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Sergey Markedonov: René Descartes, while discussing the issue of terminological accuracy, claimed, "If philosophers were always in agreement about the meaning of words, almost all their disputes would evaporate."¹ Today, terms such as "post-colonialism," "decolonization," and "imperial past" frequently appear in scholarly papers, social networks, media materials, and the statements of policy-makers. However, it becomes challenging to distinguish between academic discussions surrounding post-colonial discourses and political explanatory models. How do we determine where scientific reasoning shapes our understanding of realities and where politicized propaganda obscures meaningful debates?

During the Soviet era, Lenin's ideas on "party principles in literature" were widely debated.² Perhaps we are currently witnessing the emergence of new party principles in the realm of humanitarian knowledge. For you personally, what does post-colonialism signify? Is it a productive theory (or theories) that elucidates international relations and various national narratives, or is it primarily a political instrument?

Richard Tempest: The short answer to whether postcolonialism as a discipline can be fenced off from the realm of politics and political PR, is: *no, it cannot*. Just

¹ Descartes, René. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

² Lenin, Vladimir, "Party Organisation and Party Literature," Lenin Internet Archive, November 13, 1905, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/13.htm>.

ask Governor Ron De Santis of Florida, who has predicated his campaign for the US presidency on a crusade against “wokeism” in schools and universities, with the term in question covering academic subjects such as critical race theory, gender studies, and yes, postcolonialism. Or take Niall Ferguson, one of the finest historians writing in the English language today, whose *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* represents a comprehensive pushback, from a British imperial perspective, against the anti-colonial, let’s-decenter-the-West narrative you referenced¹. Next. Culture is a permeable, dynamic continuum that extends across all institutional and social spaces. Nationally, internationally, or globally, culture has priorities and agendas, which are set by people and institutions of power. The *professoriate* is a strong guild, a stratum of power. It engenders and endorses new sociopolitical doctrines and the lexicons that go with them, while also credentialing all students in tertiary education. De Santis, for example, graduated *magnum cum laude* from Yale with a BA in History (a notably strong program) and subsequently earned a law degree from Harvard. Culture’s nexuses and linkages are always ideological and always negotiable, in the sense that they permit communication, whether of the positive or negative kind, between different professional and interest groups, i.e., the centers of power in society. Michel Foucault, whose thinking about the relationship between power and knowledge continues to shape postcolonialism observed: “I have never tried to analyze anything whatsoever from the point of view of politics, but always to ask politics what it had to say about the problems with which it was confronted.”²

The early luminaries of postcolonial studies such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha were bicultural figures. The first two came into this world as imperial subjects of, respectively, France and Britain, while Bhabha was born just two years after the end of the British Raj and when newly independent India was still a British dominion. As *scholars*, they truly “asked politics what it had to say about the problems with which it was confronted.” Fanon and Said, however, were also active revolutionaries; by contrast, Bhabha is an active Harvard professor. (I should note that even today, Martinique, the Caribbean Island of Fanon’s birth, continues to be an overseas “single territorial collectivity” of the French Republic as well as a “special territory” of the EU.) The lived experience of this trinity of postcolonial voices saw them move, conceptually as well as physically, across national and geographical barriers. As public intellectuals, they brought into being – scripted – an entirely new audience for their critique of Western conceptualizations of the global East and South. (This audience is one that in large measure resides in the West, on and off its university campuses.) The field of postcolonial studies, whose pioneers they were, continues to bear an imprint of their biographical experiences and passionate commitments. In a similar manner, the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism has retained something of the flavor of the personalities of its creators: see Marx’s romantic, even bohemian attachment to the proletariat as the redeemer of mankind, or Lenin’s sectarian bent and coarseness of style. His writings on literary and philosophical subjects may have been dogmatic, even flat; yet he was as alive to the poetics of power as Foucault. Lenin’s emphasis

1 Ferguson, Niall. *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*. London: Penguin Group, 2004.

2 Foucault, Michel. “Polemics, Politics and Problemizations: An Interview.” In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

on *partiinnost'*, or "party spirit," stemmed from his recognition that the doctrine of revolutionary Marxism required the hierarchical subordination, in a textual as well as a political sense, of all its sympathizers, supporters and adherents, even "some Christian elements" and "some mystics," to the "Social-Democratic working-class movement,"¹ i.e., the Bolshevik party. It is a fact of Western academic life that in certain fields in the humanities such as postcolonial studies or gender studies one encounters self-appointed and even appointed custodians of the "right" approach and "right" interpretation. Nonetheless, some of the terms introduced by postcolonial scholars, for instance, such as "Orientalism" (Said) and "mimicry" and "hybridity" (Bhabha), have acquired wide academic currency and proved very useful, even for scholars outside the discipline. As a type of critical theory, postcolonialism focuses on the hierarchies and distributions of power, but is also a field that interacts and communicates with a range of academic cum social ideologies e.g. comparative literature, feminism, and deconstructionism.

As far as my own academic work is concerned, I employ postcolonialism first of all as an analytical tool. I value postcolonial scholars such as Said or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for extracting exciting new meanings from well-read and much-quoted cultural texts. Take, for example, Said's analysis of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition, which I adduce in my lectures on the charismatics of the modern age. Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the most famous work of postcolonial scholarship, and certainly its most elegantly written one, not only reveals this Palestinian nationalist's admiration for Napoleon ("his advance preparations were of unparalleled magnitude and thoroughness;"² "characteristically subtle"³) but offers a fresh new appreciation of his entire Egyptian project ("not until quite late in the [nineteenth] century, with the single exception of Napoleon's Institut d'Égypte, was much attention given to the academic study of the modern, or actual, Orient"⁴).

Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism, that is, the practice where a minority group constructs a cultural narrative that explains its collective, core identity by endowing it with a unique, collective personhood, has aided me in my investigations of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's historiosophy of Russia and, in particular, his conceptualization of the Russian national sense of self. I will permit myself to quote a passage from *Overwriting Chaos*, my study of Solzhenitsyn's literary constructions and representations:

"The writer regarded nations as 'generalized personalities'⁵ with their own unique virtues, vices, and psycho-cultural inner core, and this essentialist doctrine shapes the epic's treatment of ethnic identity and difference. In *August 1914*, the authorial narrator ponders over the faces of the Russian soldiers who fought and died in World War I: 'There are no photographs of them, and this is all the more regrettable because since then the composition of our nation has changed, faces have changed and no lens will ever rediscover those honest beards, those good-natured eyes, those relaxed

1 Lenin 1905.

2 Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. P. 80.

3 Ibid., 82.

4 Ibid., 52.

5 Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *Nobel Lecture*. In *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947-2005*, edited by Edward E. Ericson Jr., and Daniel J. Mahoney. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006.

and unselfish expressions.¹ Those unphotographed peasants in their lumpy uniforms, we are invited to conclude, hail from a more nationally authentic time and place, which endowed them with an organic unity of self that was lost, perhaps irretrievably, during the decades of communist rule.”²

My new research project, on the poetics of charismatic leadership, treats charisma not as a collection of personality traits, nor as an ideological phenomenon, but rather “the ability to influence without logic” (Quentin Crisp) that is content-free and value-neutral. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche declares that power, in its purity, is a thing in itself; a given that stands beyond conceptualization: “A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength – life itself is *will to power* [...]”³ Charisma is just as contentless as power, for which it acts as a filter or funnel. Also, like power, its dynamics follow the same rules across historical and national periods. Social circumstances and ideological frameworks may change, but the typology of charismatic personalities does not. I set my analysis in a historical context that extends back to the time of the French revolution, when charismatic actors in the modern sense first appeared. One of them was Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the anticolonial revolution in Saint-Domingue (Haiti; 1791-1804) and the founder of history’s first modern black state. My analyses are informed by recent postcolonial scholarship on Louverture. See, for instance, the “Postcoloniality and Blackness” special edition of *Callaloo* (Winter 2014), an African and African-American literary journal published by the John Hopkins University Press.⁴

Sergey Markedonov: Initially, postcolonial theories emerged as a critical (re) evaluation of Western scholarly and political hegemony. The authors conducting these studies gathered extensive primary sources and presented compelling arguments in support of their critique. They effectively elaborated on the oppressive nature of colonialism, as well as the ideological hypocrisy and cynicism behind the concept of the “White man’s burden” advocated by its proponents. However, is there a potential danger of swinging to the opposite extreme, wherein all the excesses associated with decolonization and nation-building in newly independent countries are justified? How can scholars ensure a balanced approach to these issues?

Richard Tempest: The risk is always there: Bhabha has been accused of this very sin. All knowledge can be ideologized, even science and math, and endorsed, altered, or dismissed accordingly. “[...] Ideology most typically presents itself to the text as ‘life’ rather than as category, as the immediate stuff of experience rather than a system of concepts,” explains Terry Eagleton.⁵ Or to put it differently, ideology is politics told as a story. Postcolonial reassessments of cultural and social identities and behaviors may produce positive outcome, especially when making knowledge available to a wider audience; and when treating that audience’s agendas and experiences as sources of knowledge. Yet the priorities of science and scholarship can clash with those of the formerly or currently disenfranchised: see the controversy surrounding the astronomical observatories on the Mauna Kea Mountain in Hawaii, a location that is sacred to

1 Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *August 1914. The Red Wheel / Knot I*, by H.W. Willetts. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. P. 328–329.

2 Tempest, Richard. *Overwriting Chaos: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Fictive Worlds*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019. P. 396.

3 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: the Modern Library, 1992. P. 211.

4 *Callaloo*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Winter 2014). Accessed via JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i24264856>.

5 Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. London: Verso, 1978. P. 81.

native Hawaiians, who object to their presence there; but especially the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope, which is ongoing despite determined opposition from indigenous activists and environmentalists. Or here is another example. Just yesterday morning (June 17, 2023) I accessed the site of *The Guardian* newspaper, an impeccably progressive publication, where I learned about recent municipal goings-on in the town of Hamtramck, Michigan. In 2015 this Muslim-majority Detroit suburb became the first US city to elect a Muslim-majority council, to the delight of left-thinking activists across the nation. However, the council's decision to exclude LGBTQ+ flags from city property during this year's Pride Month of June has appalled those very same activists while attracting the approbation and support of Republican conservatives, whose attitude to political Islam usually is, shall we say, skeptical. Postcolonial decentering can be disorienting.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the 1996 constitution outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation (the first one in history to do so), even though same-sex relationships and LGBTQ+ identities do not enjoy acceptance among broad swaths of the country's black majority population. Yet Julius Malema, South Africa's most charismatic politician and a racial nationalist ("we are not calling for the slaughtering of white people – at least for now"), led protests against Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who recently signed legislation prescribing the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality." "We are here to say to Uganda, as long as the LGBTQ+ community is not free in Uganda, we are not free."²

Still, Museveni's anti-gay strictures, brutal thought they may seem to an informed Western conscience, do not begin to define him intellectually. He is one of Africa's most fascinating second-generation leaders whose career illustrates the promise but also the systemic failures of postcolonial state-building. Postcolonial scholars may find him a tough nut to conceptualize. In her seminal essay "How the Heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today" (2021), Spivak goes over her reasons for seceding from postcolonialism as a discipline that seeks, or has, all the answers: "[...] With the simultaneity brought in by globalization, precolonial structures of power and corruption are coming back and beginning to inhabit the polity. This catches the relay of the difference between the national liberators and the masses and becomes part of the difficult burden of the heritage of postcolonialism. In India it is the caste system, which never quite went away and is much older than colonialism. Colonialism was yesterday. This is thousands of years old."³ Once upon a time, and six presidential elections ago, Museveni was seen by many as the last best hope for the Pan-African ideal. Some even referred to him as a "Black Bismarck."⁴ Like Tito, Mao, and Castro, Museveni belongs to a select band of revolutionaries who ascended to supreme power by waging a successful guerrilla war; in his case, against

1 Quoted in: Iavan Pijoo, "Kissing Boers, Slaughtering Whites: 4 Malema Quotes That Touched A Nerve," Sowetan Live, March 27, 2019, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-03-27-kissing-boers-slaughtering-whites-4-malema-quotes-that-touched-a-nerve/>.

2 Quoted in: Danai Nesta Kupemba, "Furious Protesters Beg 'Tyrant' Uganda President Not To Kill LGBTQ+ People Under Crue New Law," The Pink News, April 5, 2023, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/04/05/julius-malema-uganda-south-africa-lgbtq-law-protest/>.

3 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "How the Heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today," *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 19–29.

4 James C. McKinley Jr., "Uganda Leader Stands Tall in New African Order," The New York Times, June 15, 1997, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/15/world/uganda-leader-stands-tall-in-new-african-order.html..>

the incompetent regime of Milton Obote. As a social thinker – and he undoubtedly is one – Museveni is remote from postcolonialism's theoretical and methodological positions. In fact, he never abandoned the scientistic notions of his student days, "embrace[ing] the Marxist, developmentalist, and modernization paradigms"¹ and "believe[ing] that political institutions were hostage to the material circumstances of their time."² A defining aspect of Museveni's reading of Uganda's past is that he posits a fundamental continuity between the colonial and postcolonial periods, which he does not regard as necessarily a bad thing: "[...] Because he sees the historical rupture of colonialism in developmental rather than in moral terms, Museveni is quite critical of many elements of the 'traditions' of his people [the Bahima ethnic group – *RT*] and of Ugandans in general, in ways that eclipse more modern images."³ Museveni is well known for rejecting the notion of a multiparty system as a necessary component of democracy – a point on which he is in agreement with the late Solzhenitsyn, though his reasoning is particular to Uganda's – and postcolonial Africa's – situation. "His argument, at its core, is that because Ugandan society has not yet evolved from a 'vertical' structure, based on the political salience of ethnic and religious identities, to a 'horizontal' one, based on 'classes,' the masses – most of whom are peasants – are susceptible to manipulation by unscrupulous elites."⁴

The austere President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, is another guerrilla commander who came to power through victory in a civil war. Thirteen years younger than Museveni, at one time he served as the head of military intelligence in the latter's army, but after becoming Rwanda's de facto leader he fell out with his former patron. Kagame rules over a country whose current political condition offers further confirmation of the problematics of postcolonial analysis. It would be difficult to argue that Rwanda, competently governed though it may be, is a democratic state, or even a state of laws; or that its Hutu majority enjoys the same rights and status as the governing Tutsi minority. As in the case of Israel, Cambodia and Armenia, what we have here is a twenty-first-century society whose distinctive political practices owe a great deal to the genocidal trauma that engendered, or at least molded, these respective state-building projects. Rwanda is a trauma polity. Its authoritarian structures of government are accompanied by a hyper-muscular foreign policy that has turned it into a "continental peacekeeper"⁵ or "Africa's policeman."⁶ "[...] President Paul Kagame seeks to identify himself and project his country – through word and deed – as an African security provider in Sub-Saharan Africa."⁷ In addition to its participation in UN peacekeeping and humanitarian missions in Mali, Darfur, and Haiti, the last decade has seen unilateral Rwandan military interventions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

1 Kassimir, Ronald. "Reading Museveni: Structure, Agency and Pedagogy in Ugandan Politics." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 33, no. 2/3 (1999). P. 652.

2 Liam Taylor. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Yoweri Museveni," A Review of African Political Economy, July 27, 2021, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://roape.net/2021/07/27/the-eighteenth-brumaire-of-yoweri-museveni/>.

3 Kassimir 1999, 655.

4 Ibid., 654.

5 Federico Donelli. "Rwanda's Unilateral Interventionism in African Conflicts: Determinants and Implications," Trends, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/rwandas-unilateral-interventionism-in-african-conflicts-determinants-and-implications/>.

6 Jessica Moody. "How Rwanda Became Africa's Policeman," Foreign Policy, November 21, 2022, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/21/how-rwanda-became-africas-policeman/>.

7 Cannon, Brendon J., and Federico Donelli. "Rwanda's Military Deployments in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Neoclassical Realist Account." *The International Spectator* 58, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 109–127.

the Central African Republic, and Mozambique. Now there is even the possibility of Rwandan troops being dispatched to Benin as that West African nation battles a jihadist insurgency. Rwanda's military, the Rwandan Defence Forces, may be the most capable in sub-Saharan Africa. One is reminded of Voltaire's witticism, "Where some states have an army, the Prussian army has a state."

As a scholar with an interest in the geopolitical and geocultural realities of the emerging multipolar world, I am fascinated by the manner in which postcolonial studies account – or sometimes fail to account – for the discontinuities in the progress or regress of state-building projects in post-Soviet Eurasia and the global South.

Sergey Markedonov: In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by the distinguished American researcher of Indian origin, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a sensitive issue is raised: the problem of representation.¹ Spivak questions who has the authority to speak on behalf of the oppressed. Can a white man effectively discuss the experiences of black women? Can an ethno-activist researcher accurately describe ethno-activists? Furthermore, Spivak challenges the notion of whether anything other than self-descriptions has the right to exist. What is your opinion on how to resolve this complex puzzle?

Richard Tempest: The conundrum in question cannot be resolved. However, it should be acknowledged and confronted and examined from a variety of discursive angles, including the postcolonial one. One may always hope that reasoned discussion will generate insight and intra-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary understanding. On a personal note, my own biographical credentials may qualify or disqualify me from speaking about, let alone on behalf of, the oppressed masses. I was born in London to an English father and Bulgarian mother, spent seven years as a child in Moscow, where my father worked as the correspondent of the British communist party newspaper *Morning Star*, was educated at Oxford, and have been teaching in the United States for a good four decades. I have lived in South America and Bulgaria.

Several years ago I designed an undergraduate course entitled "Russia and Black America," which I teach every spring semester. This is a survey of the interactions between key African American figures and cultural practices, and Russian imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet culture, in a historical and socio-political context, with emphasis on Russian-sourced cultural transfers that impacted and sometimes shaped the Black American experience. I examine, first, the impact of those transfers on African American political life, literature, music, and popular culture; second, the role of African Americans in US-Soviet contestations about national destiny, minority rights, and political persecutions; third, the presence, reception, and influence of Black American culture in Russia during the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries; and fourth, the direct involvement of African American artists and activists in the Soviet experiment as well as the events of the post-communist transition. Black American culture is shown as being in a centuries-long dialogue with its Russian counterpart and is mapped as a visible, audible, readable – and revealing – presence in the Russian World. By the way, there is very little Pushkin in this course! Instead, I

1 Morris, Rosalind C., and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

center it around several accounts of lived Black American experience which happen to possess high narrative value. In other words, these are exciting stories of adventure and accomplishment, sometimes in the face of tremendous adversity.

In my course, the African American men and women who effected those interactions with Russians or Soviets speak in their own voices, through their own texts. We look at the biographies of four Black Americans, each of whom is in their own way representative of Black American life in the twentieth century. Frederick Bruce Thomas (1872–1928), the son of former slaves, fled the Deep South via New York and Europe to make his fortune in Moscow as a restaurateur before the Revolution, which dispossessed him and forced him to leave Russia for good. He is the subject of *The Black Russian* (2013,) a bestselling biography by Vladimir Alexandrov, a Princeton University emeritus professor who happens to be of Cossack descent. Then there is the story of James Patterson (b. 1933) – my older readers will be familiar with this name. He is the biracial son of an American-Russian couple who was born in Moscow, acted in the classic musical film *Circus* (1936), grew up to become an officer in the Soviet navy and subsequently a popular Russian poet, and emigrated to the United States in the 1990s. Robert Robinson (1906–1994) was a Ford Motor Company worker who went to Soviet Russia in search of employment, spent more than four decades there as a captive of the communist system, and then escaped back to the United States. *Black on Red* (1988), Robinson's reminiscences of life under Joseph Stalin and his successors, is one of those rare instances when a working-class survivor of history gives voice to what he has witnessed and undergone in book form. Novelist Andrea Lee (b. 1953), who spent a year living in Moscow in the late 1970s, is the author of *Russian Journal* (1981), a beautifully written travelogue. It assesses the reality of the late Soviet Union from the perspective of an informed Black American observer and holds hints of the collapse of the communist system just over a decade later. My students also read Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), a classic of African American literature that is a searing story of two gruesome murders perpetrated by a depraved and destitute youth who grows up in the worst part of Chicago's Negro ghetto. This novel is post-Dostoevskian (think *Crime and Punishment*) in its multilayered examination of extreme environments, personalities, behaviors, and ideologies.

A Marxist will tell you that oppression is invariably class-based, for the class struggle is the motive force of history, whereas Robin DiAngelo, the celebrated author of *White Fragility: Why It Is So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018), will enlighten you along very different lines: "The foundation of the United States is structural racism. It is built into all of the institutions. It is built into the culture, and in that sense we've all absorbed the ideology. We've all absorbed the practices of systemic racism, and that's what I mean when I say we are racist. [...]. What I mean is that all white people have absorbed racist ideology, and it shapes the way we see the world and the way we see ourselves in the world, and it comes out in the policies and practices that we make and that we set up."¹ And yes, professor DiAngelo is white. The unstated corollary of her position, however, is that white people are complicated, contradictory, multifaceted

1 Chotiner, Isaac. "Robin DiAngelo Wants White Progressives to Look Inward," *The New Yorker*, July 14, 2021, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/robin-diangelo-wants-white-progressives-to-look-inward>.

and therefore, interesting, whereas people of color are, though benignly just, also benignly undifferentiated. That said, in March 2023 US Congressman Jamaal Bowman responded to Governor De Santis's effort to remove black history from the curriculum by sending him a "care package" that included DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. I have no information about the Governor's response.

Or take colorblind casting, which is now a common practice in many TV and cinematic productions, particularly those originating in the UK. Recent examples include Channel 5's three-part series *Anne Boleyn* (2021), starring black actress Jodie Turner-Smith as Henry VIII's doomed queen, and Netflix's historical romance *Bridgerton* (2020-), in which Queen Charlotte, the wife of King George III, and sundry other characters are played by actors of colour. About the latter production, the African American journalist Nylah Burton commented, "In the world of *Bridgerton*, Black men marry white women, Asian men dance with Black women, white men marry Asian women – all seamlessly and without a whiff of racism or prejudice. For many, this is delightful and progressive. For others, it's a confusing trend with disturbing potential consequences."¹

And here are cultural news items that may be closer to home where my Russian readers are concerned. I refer to the hit BBC series *Chernobyl* (2019), which I happen to think is excellent both dramatically and as an exercise in historical verisimilitude. However, it was not without controversy. On June 1, 2019 actress Karla Marie Sweet sent out a tweet critiquing the series: "2 eps into #chernobyl. It's good! just one thing though... i get all the characters might have been white IRL [in real life – RT] but they also would have spoken with ukrainian accents + these actors have accents from all over the UK. So, if throwing accuracy out of the window in that case, why no PoC [people of colour – RT]." Even leaving the issue of "Ukrainian accents" aside – Ms. Sweet's knowledge of history is minimal – her comments would appear to be delightfully uninformed, as was asseverated by no less an authority than the RT news channel. As it turns out, however, the Chernobyl liquidators included Igor Hiryak, a black Soviet conscript, as was later confirmed by RT itself. Yet when interviewed by the BBC, Hiryak offered this take on the ongoing debate about casting for the series: "That's nonsense, some dark-skinned person, possibly a foreigner, appearing at such a site in Soviet times!" The intersections of history, race, and politics can be surprisingly convoluted.

Here is my working solution: where colorblind casting does not by implication deny the historical existence of black slavery and oppression, and ethnic-based othering, it is licit. Otherwise, it becomes problematic. In any case, Western societies still have space for this kind of conversation, even if activists within and outside the academy try to preempt or even nix the debate.

Sergey Markedonov: After the collapse of the USSR and Socialist Yugoslavia, discourses of anti-and-post-colonialism emerged in the post-Soviet and ex-Yugoslav republics. These approaches gained popularity and support in Western academia. However, according to many scholars, these replicas of post-colonial studies overlook numerous nuances of nation-building in the former USSR and Yugoslav space, such as

1 Burton, Nylah. "Is Color-Blind Casting in Regency-Era Romances *Really* Progressive? Or Just Delusional?" refinery29.com, August 15, 2022, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/08/11082731/color-blind-casting-cons-bridgerton-persuasion>.

affirmative action practices. What is the most productive approach to overcoming the "memorial wars" that often accompany ethno-political hostilities?

Richard Tempest: In this regard, two books come to mind. First, *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) by my friend and colleague Maria Todorova. Her study, which has since been reissued in an updated edition, acknowledges the author's debt to the classics of postcolonial studies, particularly Said, while criticizing the latter as being "ahistorical"¹ and distinguishing between "orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition," and "balkanism, [which] is a discourse about imputed ambiguity."² Here it may be appropriate to say a few words about the term "discourse," for it has now penetrated into general parlance and therefore lost its original focused meaning. To a considerable extent, it is associated with the thought of Foucault, who wrote of "a system of dispersion [...] between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices" that displays "a regularity," which he termed a "discursive formation" = discourse.³ In a syntagmatic sense, discourse as a dimension of speech operates on three levels: the linguistic (e.g., specialist terminology or, if you like, the disciplinary sociolect in question); the ideological (in the sense that all written and spoken words express a particular set of ideas and principles); and the power-related (any speaker must stand in a particular relationship to the centers of power). In her book, Todorova parses the discourse of Balkanism in order to examine the intra-Balkan power relationships – ethnic, religious, political – that it covered and even concealed until they occasionally erupted into the open, and startled and appalled an otherwise indifferent outside world. This happened during the two Balkan wars of 1912–1913, and more recently in the 1990s. It is said that during the wars of the Yugoslav succession Todorov's monograph was required reading in the Clinton White House.

The second book is Alexander Etkind's *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011). Like Todorova, the author adduces Said and other postcolonial authors as a point of departure for his account of the Russian historical experience. In his Introduction, Etkind adumbrates the parameters of his study in these disciplinary terms: "Exploring the historical experience of the Russian Empire before the revolutionary collapse of 1917, this book illuminates its relevance for postcolonial theory. However, I turn the focus onto Russia's internal problems, which have not previously been discussed in postcolonial terms."⁴ This scholar's stated purpose is to discover why the Bolshevik takeover led to the establishment of the communist terror state of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and his cross-disciplinary investigation makes liberal use of Russian literary texts to elucidate his subject. As Etkind sees it, the history of Russia witnessed two parallel colonizations, an external and internal one, and it was the second of these that shaped its cultural and geopolitical fate, for the country's ruling elites, whether Muscovite, imperial, or Soviet, treated their subjects as colonial chattels. There are points of contact here with Solzhenitsyn's historical thinking, for example, as expressed in his essay *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1994). Under Peter the Great, Solzhenitsyn writes, Russia

1 Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans. Updated Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. P. 9.

2 Ibid., 17.

3 The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language (все курсивом). Vintage, 1982.

4 Etkind, Alexander. *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011. P. 2.

embarked on a “needed” process of Westernization, “but [...] at the cost of stamping out (in quite a Bolshevik fashion and with many excesses) her sense of history, her people’s beliefs, soul, and customs, for the sake of industrial development and military might.”¹ “Peter also created, for the next two hundred years, a ruling class if not always alien to the people ethnically, then always alien to them in world view.”² Further in his book Solzhenitsyn describes the Soviet Union as an empire which was sustained by the oppression of, and “requisitions”³ from, its Slavic populations, and most of all the Russian people. Food for thought, indeed.

Sergey Markedonov: Kishore Mahbubani expressed the idea of a global power shift to the East,⁴ while Parag Khanna predicted an Asian future for the world.⁵ If we accept this hypothesis, does it imply that we are experiencing a reversal of “Orientalism” sooner or later? How do you assess this possibility?

Richard Tempest: I am an optimist who believes that the cultures and nations of the notional or conceptual West – in which I include Russia – have not exhausted their potential for growth, creativity, and innovation; and that an economically and culturally productive modus vivendi between the status quo Western and the ascendant Asian worlds is still in the geopolitical cards. I find it intriguing that in China, the governing discourse is Marxist-Leninist-Maoist, i.e., one that is intellectually superannuated; that the discourse in question shapes the worldview and policies of the ruling elites, as governing discourses by definition must do; and that the arguments advanced by Chinese spokesmen against Western models of governance and modernity are often identical to those transmitted by the Soviet media during the last century. Still, it is important to keep a sense of analytical perspective, to maintain a conceptual balance. Although one may be tempted to liken China’s rise to that of Wilhelmine Germany’s hubristic ascent in the early twentieth century – even the Belt and Road Initiative invites comparisons to the Baghdad Railway – I would treat such comparisons with caution. To quote the Austrian-American psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, “It has been said that history repeats itself. This is perhaps not quite correct; it merely rhymes.”

Цитирование

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- 1 Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century*, translated by Yermolai Solzhenitsyn. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995. P. 10.
- 2 Solzhenitsyn 1996, 11.
- 3 Ibid., 83.
- 4 Mahbubani, Kishore. *The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*. N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2008.
- 5 Khanna, Parag. *The Future Is Asian: Commerce, Conflict, and Culture in the 21st Century*. N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2019.