


# Between the Russian/Soviet dependencies, neoliberal delusions, dewesternizing options, and decolonial drives

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## Abstract

Departing from the previous tripartite post-colonial/neocolonial geopolitical structure, contemporary world offers a different specter of possibilities and alliances which rearrange the former actors and their mutual relations and (in)dependencies in unexpected ways. The most striking of such shifts is the reemergence of Asia on a global scale within a dewesternizing model, which negotiates post-colonial and modernizing impulses at once. However, there are regions which have lost their ability (and right) to speak and think and were disqualified from the position of the honorary second world to that of the global South. Such are the Asian regions that used to be a colonial part of the Russian/Soviet empire. They went through a Soviet modernization which redoubled their colonial status due to a subalternized position of the Russian/Soviet empire itself, now going through its final demise. This article reflects on what options are left for the former Asian colonies of Russia/Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) which today are once again stereotyped through Orientalist or Progressivist lens, and left out by both rewesternizing and dewesternizing parties. A good option for them is a decolonial option grounded in restoring memories, local histories, and epistemologies in a complex and dynamic interplay with and a resistance to modernity. As a post-Soviet and decolonial Asian other, the author attempts a critical analysis of intersections between post-soviet and post-colonial dependencies and possible decolonizing projections that might help this other Asia eventually join the triumphant Asian century in the capacity of one of its rightful agents.

## Keywords

dewesternization, global coloniality, imperial difference, intersections of post-colonial and post-soviet dependencies

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I am writing this essay from a rather problematic position of someone with clearly Asian origins (Tatar and Uzbek, i.e. historically connected with the periphery of the major pre-modern economic and cultural ecumenes—the Muslim world, China and India) who had a misfortune of being born in Russia—a subaltern Janus-faced empire marked by imperial difference in relation to the Western capitalist empires of modernity and branding its (post)colonial subjects (like myself) first with a stigma of redoubled colonial difference (meaning the colonized others of the second-rate empire, which is itself intellectually and culturally colonized by the first rate Western capitalist empires of modernity) and today with a difficult positioning of the vanished second world and moreover, its darker colonial side, which is Asian but can hardly join the emerging Asian century in the capacity of its active and legitimate agent, being left out once again from modernity/coloniality and dewesternization and decoloniality alike. What are the reasons for this dead-end and is there a way out for the Asian other of the collapsed Soviet empire?

## Introduction

The Asian Century is obviously one of the most effective dewesternizing initiatives today which maintains polycentric capitalism in the polycentric world, yet questions the totality of Western axiology grounded in the coloniality of knowledge, being, and perception. An active proponent of dewesternizing model, Kishore Mahbubani shrewdly questions the very right of the West to impose its values and laws onto the rest of the world, whereas the West itself systematically ignores these rules and therefore cannot serve as the absolute point of reference any more. Mahbubani (2008) problematizes the universal applicability of Western social and political principles, such as democracy, political openness, abstract social justice, and human rights, demonstrating that there are successful dewesternizing countries such as India or China, which are not democratic or open in the Western sense yet successfully join modernity and more and more often raise their voices in the global dialogue. This scholar is not questioning the rhetoric of modernity though he is honestly trying to divide it from the logic of coloniality. But is this really possible?

Honest capitalism, capitalism with a human face, or polycentric capitalism are indeed effective ways of blowing off steam and work for making the world more diverse and, in some ways, more balanced and just, at the same time postponing the overdue global social and political explosion, without solving the problem behind it, precisely because it is not possible to entirely divide economy from values. Besides, the question of values itself is a very complicated one. The followers of the dewesternizing model at a close inspection demonstrate quite diverse value systems, which makes them more or less resistant to modernity/coloniality and more or less successful in their maintaining of dewesternizing stance. Turkey, as the heir of the Ottoman Sultanate, and Russia are both second-class empires of modernity marked by external imperial difference. One of them is quasi-Western and the other is quasi-Muslim and both are marked by catching up to the modernization logic. Yet the chances are quite different and much more favorable in the Turkish case. The internal discrepancies and teleological conflicts between dewesternizing agents question the applicability of such alliances in the post-crisis world. BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is one of the successful

dewesternizing projects. Yet, the contrast of Russia with the rest of BRICS countries, most of which except Russia were the colonies of the Western capitalist empires of modernity before, even in such a simple criteria as economic growth, has become so obvious that Nouriel Roubini and Ian Bremmer (2012) even suggested excluding Russia from BRICS and replacing it with Indonesia or, in the future, with Turkey.

In fact, the post-soviet space, condition, and people—in all our irreducible specificity—act as a touchstone for many contemporary critical theories such as post-Marxism, feminism, post-colonial theory, and so on, a touchstone meant not necessarily to refute but certainly to clarify and concretize many of these theoretical calculations which turn out to be non-applicable to describe or understand the ex-second world. The decolonial option stands apart in this critical company as it is not a theory in the usual sense of a self-sufficient single truth proclamation, but indeed an option acknowledging its own non-uniqueness and also, its decidedly “creolized,” or better said in decolonial terms, essentially pluriversal nature. At the same time, rejecting universalism from the start, the decolonial option turns out in the end to be one of the most conceptually persuasive of contemporary global critical approaches which is able to offer a number of concepts and theoretical mechanisms that can be useful in the interpretation of the post-Soviet experience among other local histories.

## **Decolonial option from a post-Soviet subaltern perspective**

My own acquaintance with the decolonial option was rather intricate and indirect. As a trained Americanist, I started with writing a book on US multiculturalism in the late 1990s. Among different texts that I was able to find, there were two that struck me most—Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1999) *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* and Maria Lugones’s (2003) “Playfulness, World travelling and the Loving Perception”—both exemplary decolonial texts, though I was not aware of it at that time. Working on multiculturalism led me also to plunging into post-colonial theory then fashionable in the West and virtually non-existent in Russia. My interest was not purely theoretical, but closely linked with my own geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge, of being, of perception—the difficult existential positioning of an internal, ethnically mixed, and always alienated non-Russian other of the Soviet Union/post-Soviet Russia. Reading post-colonial theorists and novelists, I recognized many similar complexes and deadlocks but also creative possibilities with which me and other non-Russian post-colonial Russian citizens were struggling. However, there was always something untranslatable in our experience which post-colonial theory for all its post-structuralist stance and the traditional focusing on Anglophone British commonwealth material was unable to grasp and recreate. So I started reflecting on the post-Soviet culture and literature vis-à-vis the post-colonial theory constantly adjusting its concepts and assumptions to the completely different local history and trajectory. What I already missed in post-colonial studies at that point was precisely a number of truly overall conceptual categories that would not simply describe a post-colonial situation or attempt to hide their locality and pretend to be universal, but would be really able to grasp certain mechanisms, logic, and directions of evolvement of modernity seen from the position of the colonized people not necessarily coming from the ex-British or French colonies.<sup>1</sup> It was then, in 2000, that I read

Walter Mignolo's (2000) *Local Histories/Global Designs* and started my journey toward the decolonial option.

The most powerful decolonial conceptual metaphor for me was and certainly still is that of global coloniality (of power, of being, of perception, of gender, of knowledge, of perception). It is always manifested in particular local forms and conditions, remaining at the same time the recognizable connecting thread for the wholesome perception and understanding of otherwise often meaningless and cruel dissociated manifestations of modernity. This concept in contrast with many other recent catchwords, strangely enough, does retain its universally pluriversal status even when sent through a test of post-Socialist devilish details generally capable of discrediting many other seemingly universal views. The secret, it seems, lies in the fact that the decolonial option is undermining the very epistemic (cognitive) grounds and principles of modernity/coloniality and not just adding and describing various regions or phenomena through generally accepted and shared means and disciplinary gimmicks such as post-Structuralism, post-Marxism, and so on, and within the universally accepted scholarly myths such as modernity, progress, development, democracy, human rights, and so on. This "learning to unlearn in order to relearn" (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012) is an explosion, leaving no stone unturned in the realm of modernity/coloniality and often leaving the scholar with very meager theoretical and conceptual tools after the decolonization of most contaminated concepts and notions in circulation. Not too many scholars are ready for this complete rejection of the master's tools and starting from scratch. This urge leads to the necessity of elaborating new concepts or digging out the marginalized and forgotten ones through reconstructing and tracing alternative genealogies and trajectories which has remained one of the crucial tasks of the decolonial option. However, we cannot allow ourselves to fall into a trap of writing entirely for ourselves, in a decolonial jargon impenetrable for those uninitiated, and as long as the coloniality of knowledge persists in this world, we must organize our discourse in such a critical and provocative way as to demonstrate the locality and provinciality of universalized Western concepts by destabilizing and juxtaposing them with their multiple non-Western equivalents, opposites, or voids.

## The external imperial difference

The archeological urge dominated the first stage of the decolonial endeavor. I also started making my own decolonial interventions precisely through this path—looking at the history of the Russian Empire and its colonies from which my ancestors originated—the Russian Orient and the Russian South, from the darker side of modernity/coloniality, and introducing the unknown local histories into the modern/colonial matrix of power (Tlostanova, 2003). At that point in the early 2000s, decolonial option still mostly revolved around Latin America and the Caribbean and the US-based diasporic anti-colonial and antiracist thought. Hence, the colonial difference played the first fiddle in most decolonial reflections. The question of imperial difference was considered in a rather limited way mostly in relation to the South of Europe and the internal imperial difference of Spain, Italy, and Portugal. Moreover, most decolonial thinkers at the time still equated modernity with capitalism and Christianity with Catholicism and Protestantism. The rivalry with the empires of lighter weight categories (non-capitalist, non-Christian, or

with a “wrong” Christianity, alphabetically non-Latin, non-modern, and non-European or questionably modern and European) such as Russia or the Ottoman Sultanate—was beyond the interest or competence of most decolonial thinkers.

The Soviet and post-Soviet experience tinted with characteristically ideological deceptions only added to the decolonial reluctance to venture into analyzing Eurasia, especially that some of decolonial theorists had decidedly Marxist origins and refused to see the Soviet Union as a colonial empire, while others tended to see Russia and the Soviet Union as a blurred zone of semi-periphery or even a colonial zone comparable to India and Latin America and not to Britain or Spain. When I noticed these inconsistencies, I realized that it was time to elaborate more on the external imperial difference and on Russia/Soviet Union as a Janus-faced empire and to look at many useful decolonial concepts and categories through the prism of a very specific experience this subaltern empire had to offer. It was an important task in itself since the imperial/colonial problematic of Russian/Soviet modernity has not even been recognized as a legitimate subject of study before. And in a sense I had to begin from an empty space with no post-colonial discourse or critical ethnic studies with which to argue or come into dialogue.

So I started investigating the external imperial difference as opposed to the internal one represented by the South of Europe (Dainotto, 2000) and its versions of coloniality of knowledge, of being, of perception, of gender, as well as its secondary and distorted forms of Orientalism, Eurocentrism, mental and cultural dependency of which Russia and its multiply colonized colonies are a paradigmatic example: rich yet poor, providential yet failed. Russia has never been seen by Western Europe as its part, remaining a racialized empire, which feels itself a colony in the presence of the West and is based on a catching-up logic, a number of schizophrenic collective complexes, ideologies of the besieged camp or alternatively, victory in defeat. The imperial difference generated Russia’s secondary status in European eyes and consequently, an open or hidden Orientalization.

## The Janus-faced empire

As a result of my investigations I came to a conclusion that the Russian secondary Orientalism and Eurocentrism reflect and distort the Western originals as the Orientalist constructs. In this case, they turn out not only more complex but also built on the principle of double mirror reflections, on copying of Western Orientalism with a slight deviation and necessarily, with a carefully hidden, often unconscious sensibility that Russia itself is a form of a mystic and mythic Orient for the West. Western Orientalist discourses have been transmuted in secular modernity as specific ways of representation and interpretation of Russian non-European colonies, which were used as replacements of the missing Orient and coded as such. As a result, both mirrors—the one turned in the direction of the colonies and the one turned by Europe in the direction of Russia—appear to be distorting mirrors that create a specific unstable sensibility of Russian intellectuals, writers, and artists. The imperial difference generated a sensibility of balancing between the role of an object and that of the subject in the epistemic and existential sense (Tlostanova, 2012a).

For the subaltern Russian Empire, the secondary Eurocentrism and the imperial difference with the more successful capitalist empires of modernity (Great Britain, France,

Germany) comes forward in the shaping of subjectivity of both the colonizer and the colonized. On the global scale, this imperial difference mutates into the colonial one, as Russia becomes a country that allows the Western philosophy, knowledge, and culture to colonize itself with no blood shed, the Janus-faced empire that felt itself a colony in the presence of the West and, at the same time, half heartedly played the part of the caricature “civilizer” in its non-European colonies. Russia projects its own inferiority complexes onto its colonies through its self-proclaimed modernizer and civilizer role. This refers specifically to Muslim colonies that are becoming the South of the poor North today, the multiply colonized others of the defeated Russia. In case of the Ottoman Sultanate, this complex gave birth to self-racializing and efforts to whiten the elites, while in case of Russia it generated a complex of a secondary European. In Central Asia, it led to self-orientalization, self-racializing, multiple inferiority complexes, tricksterism, and in the Caucasus, to a symbolic self-whitening, and mimicry, resulting in a stagnation of any alternative political and social movements and actors (Tlostanova, 2011b).

Therefore the decolonial category of imperial difference tested against the Russian local history allows unexpected, more nuanced, and contradictory elaborations than in the case of many other imperial–colonial configurations. The dead-end-ness of imperial difference has been for centuries a specific Russian problem, much before the capitalism/socialism divide. It is re-inscribed today in the return of the North/South division. This specific model, nevertheless clearly answering the logic of coloniality in the form of the (post)socialist brand of modernity, is mutant in the sense that race and racism as universal classifications in modernity/coloniality have been masked here by class or ideology, sometimes ethnicity and/or religion. But the principle of “misanthropic skepticism” detected by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) in relation to more Black-and-White situations of colonial difference, stayed intact taking humanity away from humans and rendering their lives dispensable. The religious factor in the Czarist empire was translated into racial/ethnic categories, the Soviet regime transferred it into ideology and class, whereas today’s Russia interprets religion, culture, and ethnicity in purely racial forms. Soviet racializing had one face in the metropolis (when “enemies of the people” of any ethnic and religious belonging were rendered subhuman) and a different face in the colonies where the discourses of the civilizing mission, development, progressivism, and Soviet Orientalism clearly demonstrated their links with Western colonialist macro-narrative. To my mind, the lighter side of Soviet modernity was grounded in ideological and social differences whereas its darker side was much less advanced in the way it reiterated mostly 19th century racist clichés and human taxonomies mixed with hastily adapted historical materialist dogmas.

The way out of the dead-end of imperial difference was and is looked for in Russia in the sphere of transcendental, spiritual, overcoming the materiality of the world in the direction of some sacred geography superseding geopolitics. This providential exceptionalism added specific colors to Russian xenophobia that saw the other as hostile to its great theocratic project (Pelipenko, 2007). This circumstance of never actually disenchanted or secularized consciousness has to be taken into account when we analyze Eurasia in order not to equate it with the rational and secular West/North but also not to take a Western simplifying stance of stereotyping Russia as an “Asiatic empire.” Russia strove to build, however unsuccessfully, its own global model, its own modernity sharing

the main vices of the Western original but positioning itself as an independent alternative project.

## The neo-imperial turn in contemporary Russia

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unattainability of this task became obvious, and this was the most crucial failure of the Russian/Soviet state. Having lost its quasi-theocratic element in the form of the Soviet myth, Russia first unsuccessfully attempted to change it into a nationalist ideal. However, the narrow skin of the nation-state interpreted in an essentialist way turned out to be too small to cover the enormous rotting corpse of the Soviet empire whose ideological clichés are still quite alive in the minds of many people. This sensibility is now being manipulatively exploited by the most recent Putin's administration move to reanimate the empire appealing to the deepest archetypes of the Russian collective unconscious, grounded in the deification of the Tsar and of power. Hence, today's fitful quests for and inventions of non-existent or totally destroyed authentic local intellectual traditions that are artificially linked with Putin's personality cult. A graphic example is the exhibition in *Manege* (a pompous exhibition hall across the Kremlin) which took place when I was writing this article. This exhibition formally was devoted to the 400th anniversary of Romanovs' dynasty. However, in reality, it conveyed one simple idea of deification of power in its personalized forms and the equation of the ruler, the state, and the country, pedaling patriotism in the form of personal loyalty to the ruler. The exhibition consisted mostly of icon-like schmaltzy pictures of canonized Putin surrounded by the luminaries of Russian and even Western philosophy, whose works have been searched for the most "appropriate" (and odious) quotations for the legitimation of today's power (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

I see this syndrome as an important and under-theorized one which the decolonial option as well as post-socialist discourse must take into account and analyze in an intersectional way, because we cannot remain blind or insensitive to the internal impulses and metamorphosis mechanisms of too easy shifts from the struggles for independence, national self-assertion against the demonized West or more global dewesternizing tendencies, to maybe even more dangerous local variants of "banana republics," miserable kinglylets, and slack-baked dictators seeing their people as slaves and dispensable lives. Decolonial thinkers cannot allow themselves to be deceived by such populist anti-Western rhetoric and the calls for sacrificing anyone's lives for the sake of some distant happiness or global justice. This is precisely what happened in many socialist countries and we—the heirs of this collapsed world—have a better immunity against this looming danger. This is what we see today in the post-Soviet space in full swing, and particularly in Russia. This is also seen in a number of Latin American countries, in Asia, in Africa, and even (to turn the conversation into a self-reflective mode) within the decolonial option itself where not all members share a simple but absolutely necessary ethical principle of living and acting in accordance with the philosophy that we proclaim.

## Race and internal colonization

Now let us go back for a moment to the specificity of the Russian configuration in relation to one of the most fundamental categories of modernity and hence of decolonial



**Figure 1.** One of the showpieces at the Exhibition *The Romanovs. My History* (November 2013).

critique—that of race which has also stood in the center of my attention in the last decade. The replacement of race as the main indicator of global coloniality in classical decolonial discourse and its translation into other categories is important in the light of internal colonization theory recently revamped among the post-soviet scholars not marked by racial/religious or cultural difference and neglecting the Russian/Soviet post-colonial situations per se. I find it important to criticize their position precisely from the decolonial stance taking into account both the imperial and the colonial difference in motion. I mean here mainly Alexander Etkind's (2011) book on the internal colonization as a model of the Russian empire where the state colonized its people (the ethnically same serfs). This model is reductionist and blind toward the experience of the real colonial others of the Russian empire, those marked by racial, religious, cultural, and not merely social differences. Particularly alarming is Etkind's distortion of race in the Russian/Soviet context. Speaking of estates as a substitute for race, he carefully avoids those phenomena which have always demonstrated peculiar Russian manifestations of racism focusing his attention on ethnically Russian and religiously Orthodox strata. He



ignores the so-called *inorodtsy*—those born others—who were an ethnic-racial category because even if they adopted Christianity they remained others and could not change their estate (Tlostanova, 2010a). The tactic of deliberately ignoring the real colonial others brings Etkind to interpreting the shaved beard as an anecdotal analogue of the color of skin. He reproduces coloniality of knowledge concentrating only on one side of the complex multi-directional Russian imperial-colonial matrix, which leads to a distortion of dynamic intersecting imperial and colonial processes in Russia.

A younger Russian scholar Alexey Penzin (2008) develops Etkind's model in relation to the post-Soviet period claiming that the post-soviet subject is a new subaltern of the global world. But he erases the difference between the imperial and colonial realms altogether. The Russian/Soviet case graphically demonstrates the gist of coloniality without colonialism, or the displaced locality, to use A. Penzin's term. It is useful for the development of decolonial option as a litmus test allowing to see how global and most importantly how inclusive is really this approach. The opposite is also true: the decolonial option clearly facilitates a better understanding of the post-socialist situation *x* than any liberal, Marxist, or post-colonial theories or all the more so, the nationalist jingoistic and neo-imperial models mentioned above.

The clarification of otherness discourses in the Russian Empire and even the USSR with its double standards of proletarian internationalism-cum-hidden racism would remain merely a curious scholarly entertainment had it not been from the very start closely connected with today's social, political, and cultural agenda and with the post-Soviet Russians' cockroach syndrome (Yerofeyev, 2000) and the post-socialist who never started to speak, according to J. Suchland (2011a) within the rebranded and often repolarized world that erased the post-socialist subject altogether. Therefore, for me from the start, the decolonial option has become not merely an archeological endeavor digging into the history of the many faces of modernity/coloniality, but an urgent contemporary form of intellectual activism aimed at decolonizing the minds and the bodies and catalyzing them to eventually change the world and themselves, provided of course if the points of no return have not been passed yet, for decoloniality brings critical rethinking into the agenda of human subjectivity and agency, mainly taking place in the realm of thinking, of knowledge production, of spirituality, of subjectivity, of ethics, of perception, of the new political models that still have no or little place for their implementation in the existing normative frames. Our task is to gradually change the consciousness, in a way inoculating people with decolonial drives and working for the creation of a global decolonial "community of sense" to paraphrase Ranciere (2009).

## Decolonial aesthetics in Eurasia

Along with introducing the new local histories into the picture of the modern/colonial matrix and the accompanying concepts such as the external imperial difference generating its own versions of coloniality, it has become crucial for me to work on the positive if yet utopian side of the decolonial option, on re-existence, not merely resistance to use A. Alban Achinte's (2006) metaphor. I am trying to project decolonial interventions into the present and especially the future probing for the spaces (museum, university, social movements) and media (academic and non-academic scholarly works, art, fiction) that

would be most appropriate for the implementation of such pluriversal tasks diversifying and unfolding the potential of decolonial thinking in unexpected interstices—(neither the North nor the South) but the vanished Second world, the shrinking post-Soviet space.

In the last several years, I have also concentrated on the potential of decolonization of gender in Eurasian borderlands taking into account a peculiar genealogy of gender discourses in this region vis-à-vis Western, mimicking Russian, more recently non-Western and native forms of feminist thought (Tlostanova, 2010b). I have also focused on theorizing the mechanisms of decolonial esthesis and analyzing its manifestations in activist repoliticized art practices in Russia and its former colonies (Tlostanova, 2011a, 2013). The choice of these two interconnected spheres was prompted by the situation of extreme rigidity and parochialism of traditional Eurocentric autistic disciplines in the dying Russian academia, so that any fresh and promising knowledge has had to be formulated outside the system of disciplinary decadence in L. Gordon's (2006) words. Gender discourses and activism which are still minimally institutionalized in the post-Soviet space allow for the emergence of interesting ideas reverberating with decolonial feminist thought all over the world. When decolonizing gender acquires creative artistic forms, it becomes even more powerful in its transforming stance—setting our perception, being, thinking, knowledge, and gender free.

Working closely with the activist art-world, I find it much more promising as a site of decolonization in the future than any traditional or neoliberal university. In Russia and in the ex-colonies of the Caucasus and Central Asia, there is a growing number of artists, theorists, and curators who are decolonizing the esthetics and the museum closely working with social movements, grassroots initiatives, local communities, and so on. Along with more predictable ethnic-racial decolonial situations of erased indigenous local histories, decoloniality is sometimes transformed in unexpected ways and transferred to analyze the material which lacks the formal links with racism or colonialism yet maintains and enforces the general deadening logic of coloniality. Such is the Russian art group *Itinerant Picker Uppers (illegal cab drivers)* which attempts to document through their road movies the reality of the Russian province suffocating under the vampire policies of the center and analyze the decolonizing potential in these practically enslaved regions (Nikolayev, 2013).

Such activism-cum-art practices (Media Impact, 2013) and the general turn toward esthetics are becoming more and more habitual in the conditions of impasse and stagnation of most social protest movements. However, these cannot really affect the economic or political decisions taken in the world and confine themselves to the sphere of thinking, perception, and sensibility. This influence seems less effective and immediate than bloody and violent revolutionary actions. Yet it slowly works for the implementation of the future radical changes many of which will be of decolonial nature. The urgent problem today is the question of agency and its limitations and the ways of decolonial potentiation through changing of the minds and of our thinking, setting our consciousness free from the global neoliberal brainwashing.

Finally, thinking over the decolonial esthetic is important for me personally not only theoretically but also artistically, because of my own creative writing and efforts to work out a decolonial fictional model informed by gender and post-socialist overtones that I attempted to do in my 2012 novel *Zalumba Agra* (Tlostanova, 2011c).

As is obvious from what I have sketched above, the last several years of my own decolonial thinking have been marked by a switch toward the present faces of global coloniality and to decolonization possibilities in Eurasia emerging today, which allows a clearer vision of how exactly decolonial concepts and ideas are modified, complicated, and developed in the post-socialist and particularly post-Soviet contexts, often conceptualized as post-dependency discourses (Kolodziejczyk and Sandru, 2012) and marked by specific intersectionality. My stance today is that of destabilizing any tendency to unambiguously and binarily. For, I am writing in the situation of extreme precariousness of a critical internal other in a dying totalitarian country whose administration grotesquely pretends to be a noble dewesternizer in its international policy, while pumping out the remaining riches to park the looted money in off-shore banks, re-colonizing, and enslaving once again the whole population regardless of our race or religion.

### **Questioning dewesternization: the BRICS experience**

In fact, all dewesternizing tendencies remain limited in the way they are still too engrossed in concrete local geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of the powerful strata of respective societies and in this sense they simply correspond to the process of one more repartition and redrawing of the world which we witness today. Human life remains equally dispensable and precarious in any of the existing scenarios—under the uni-polar hegemony of the North or under the local repression by various mostly quasi-neo-colonial regimes or smaller local “centers.” It is easy to occupy a safe Western/Northern spot and reason abstractly on the importance of anti-Western initiatives of the countries with unjustified claims to greatness. It is a convenient but morally unscrupulous position of blindness to similar suffocating results in the case of demagogic foreign and draconian domestic policies of various dictators and authoritarian states. Such an aberration does not take real human lives into account as they are treated as merely flat personages of various far-fetched theoretical schemes. What is missing in such theorizing is a sense of true (inter)relationality of everything and everyone on Earth found in Indigenous thinking and in a number of alter-global social movements.

The goals and the subjectivities of the ex-empires and ex-colonies are different as is their real economic situation and their hypothetical roles in the future world economy. Brazil in BRICS is responsible for agriculture, South Africa for natural resources, China for cheap labor force, and India for cheap intellectual resources, while Russia squarely stands for oil and gas which according to independent experts are to finish in the next two to three decades. This is a notable shift in itself quite shameful for the ex-Soviet Union: from a producer of (some though restricted) knowledge and a country with one of the best education systems in the world, Russia rapidly slides down to a policy of conscious destruction of education along with healthcare going hand in hand with demographic catastrophe characterized by first world birthrate and third world death rate. According to Vladislav Inozemtsev (2012),

the extreme rootedness of power beyond the borders of their motherland makes its anti-Western rhetoric simply grotesque; the denunciation of the states where our ministers' capitals are “parked” and where their children go to school, is nothing but laughable. To get rid of this

grotesque—hourly reproduced by the system of “sovereign democracy”—means to attempt to survive. Continuing to reproduce it is equivalent to political suicide. If the elite links its future in some way with the country which it still runs it must agree to a slow dismantling of the built system, a kind of organized retreat.

The BRICS countries are the most rapidly developing countries, whereas Russia is looking in a different direction in the sense that it is rapidly deindustrializing, going through involution and depopulation. The prostrate Russian/Soviet empire—the poor North—cannot hope to take a decent place even among the BRICS ex-colonies of the West. If the real economic growth factors and real indicators of human welfare were taken into account and not a superfluous gross domestic product (GDP), Russia would not have been able to dream of joining BRICS even if it initiated the project itself. Dewesternization is too general a concept and the vanished second world with its own versions of modernity and coloniality makes us look for other overarching metaphors to analyze the experience of Russia itself—the fallen empire orientalized in the West and always longing to be considered European, and at least four of its clearly Asian ex-colonies—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kirgizstan (geographically and anthropologically Asian and Muslim), and a questionable fifth case of Azerbaijan (resembling very much in its tradition of Europeanization the Turkish case).

If the Russian/Soviet Empire was caught in the catching-up ideology of “overtaking and surpassing,” the colonies of this second-rate empire, marked by imperial difference, turned out to be third-rate in comparison with the colonies of the capitalist empires of modernity. Their “master” was itself a slave of a more powerful master. To this general configuration of the wrong master, we must also add the Muslim affiliation of Central Asia which adds to its today’s stigmatized status. As a result, the inhabitants of this region have reacquired their subhuman status again and again.

With the obviously doomed exception of autarchic and autocratic Turkmenistan, the post-soviet post-colonial Asian nations today are torn between the grassroots impulses of joining forces with dewesternizing countries such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, a number of Arabic countries, Turkey—albeit in the capacity of small businesses cooperation and cheap labor force, and the official governmental geopolitical games of flirting with the stronger powers such as the United States and the European Union (this period largely ended today) and Russia once again. While preaching the gospel of the market economy as a global panacea, the West reluctantly allows the survivors of the Soviet Union to enter the world market in any capacity, except for its cheap labor force or raw resources. The Asian ex-colonies have been interesting to the West in the last two decades primarily as a springboard for military bases, necessary for the preparations of the righteous wars for oil. This results in devastating consequences for Central Asia which has little choice in maneuvering between the West, Russia, and the economic coalitions and regional agreements of various local kinds.

From dependent colonies within the Soviet Union, they turned into spaces, mostly ignored by the rest of the world and inhabited by unrecorded people whose future is not taken into account by the new architects of the world. The Global North uses them merely as tokens of geostrategic dominance, without capital investment. As a result of flower and fruit revolutions, the previous Soviet bosses and later presidents loyal to

Russia were in some cases replaced with neoliberal politicians and later by more pro-Russian leaders once again. As a result in post-Soviet Asia, we find the ex-Soviet bosses, the champions of Western neoliberalism, representatives of mafia structures, or more often, a combination of all three. According to Valeria Ibraeva (2002),

the leaders of Central Asia's post-communist regimes who profess their support for democratic values are chameleons who can adapt to any political system, whether Russian-style communism or American-style democracy, to maintain their own authoritarianism. Once the Asian dictator has taken power—whether bestowed by Brezhnev, George Bush, or God—he feels he has the right to do whatever he wants with his country and his people.

These balancing power games have been so far grounded in “sanctioned ignorance,” racism, and the unhealthy post-imperial hang-ups. The still lacking or strangled civil and political society in the Asian ex-colonies of the USSR, the lingering legacy of the Soviet divide-and-rule tactics, the normalized corruption, and lawlessness—all prevent these locales from pursuing any egalitarian dewesternizing and decolonial positions and coalitions.

One of the reasons for this is obviously the persisting coloniality of knowledge and of being, which is not only a Western disease but also a corrosive syndrome of those against whom it was originally launched. That is why my blue-eyed and blond Russian graduate student is treated in one of the Arabic Emirates where he works, “as a European.” This allows him to earn more money, have a better social package, and be otherwise treated in a privileged way, compared to his friends—immigrants from Bangladesh and Africa with the same qualifications—who are treated as inferior. This is how coloniality of knowledge, of being, of perception is expressed in today's world not only on the part of the West but also on the part of the non-Western people and states deeply marked by global coloniality. To get rid of this unhealthy double consciousness is very hard, particularly given that the government and hence the official politics of many Asian states are still infected by coloniality. What we, the decolonial thinkers, can do is to contribute to decolonizing the minds and the bodies of the people, to help them restore their sense of dignity and relearn to value their own lives on different grounds.

## **The global dimensions of decolonial option**

Decolonial option has been steadily globalizing in the last decade, finding parallels and responses in the sensibilities of the people from seemingly quite different local histories of Eastern and Western Europe, South-East Asia, Africa, the Arab world, Russia, and the post-Soviet countries. The common destiny of us all as monstrous victims of global coloniality has become particularly obvious after the 2008 crisis, which exposed that global coloniality can render anyone subhuman, including the ex-first world, turning us into symbols of the crisis annoying for those who are still precariously afloat (Gordon and Gordon, 2010). This further problematizes the previous Latin American localization of decolonial option and calls for an expansion of decolonial consciousness, for a true worldly stance of decolonial thinkers marked by a genuine inclusive interest in a far away other, a willingness to find out more about it through a hermeneutics of love (Sandoval,

2000), and “travelling along other people’s worlds with a loving perception” (Lugones, 2003) which is easier said than done.

All in all for me, there is a specific post-Socialist dimension of decoloniality which has to be taken into account in any efforts to formulate the grounds for the still missing post-socialist discourse. Along with historically and spatially bound (if properly institutionalized) discourses, such as post-colonial critique, a dialogue with other critical approaches focusing on modernity and its “underside” (Dussel, 1996), such as decolonial option, would be very helpful in conceptualizing of the post-Socialist condition. The advantages of the decolonial option in this respect lie in its radical conceptual stance, given the way that it touches upon and destabilizes the very mechanisms of knowledge production and institutional assumptions in an attempt to shift the geography of reasoning. This is what post-Socialist critique desperately needs as well.

Then instead of “liberal assimilation” and “postcolonial analogizing” in Suchland’s formulation (Suchland, 2011b: 110), we would have to see the ex-Second world as a diverse, contradictory, non-homogenous semi-alterity with its unique intersectionality which needs to be investigated with decolonial tools among several others. The decolonial option can help to fill the void left by the still silent post-socialist subaltern having no tools for understanding of his/her own predicament. What I mean here is not a descriptive historical study of post-Socialism not seeing the wood for the trees, and not a Eurocentric comparison of various regions in the area studies style or an application of readymade Latin American theory to Eurasian reality (Megoran et al., 2012). I mean an analysis of the underlying colonial matrix of power revealing the mechanics of the logic of coloniality as the darker side of modernity in the way post-socialist areas are linked with Western hegemony. Both post-colonial and post-Socialist discourses are the products of modernity/coloniality, emphasizing different elements and notions, yet having a common source (e.g. class and race, ideology and religion, etc.) and a shared birth-mark of the rhetoric of modernity (the mission of progress, newness, development, civilization, etc.) acting as a tool in justifying the continuing colonization of time and space, of lives, and futures.

The decolonial stance can act then as a common ground for post-colonial and post-Socialist experience both in the way it helps to reveal what was hidden before and also the way it helps to put forward the ways of thinking, being, perception disavowed by the rhetoric of modernity, be it liberal or socialist. Moreover, a decolonial stance can act as a catalyst for the final emergence of such desired post-socialist discourse because it is only after people realize their own coloniality of thinking and of being (specifically situated in Russia and its (ex)colonies through the external imperial difference and mental and cultural colonization—i.e. constant coloniality without colonialism) that they can start elaborating their own theory (Tlostanova, 2012b).

Another dimension or chord that I find more and more influential in the decolonial option is the truly global ecosophic positioning which embraces all human experience and also rethinks humanity and humanism in a decolonial “antihumanist posthuman” (Braidotti, 2013) way allowing to step up from the problematic of social exclusion, difference, and victimhood, to concentrate instead on the commonality of experience of all living organisms, on the human destiny in a dehumanized world, and on other-than-human forms of life, the “vibrant matter” (Bennett, 2010) which we would probably have

to make way for fairly soon. An Egyptian Coptic scholar Milad Hanna (2007) in his *Acceptance of the Other* calls for a global shift to a theology of life (understood as the planet's survival) as a rethought theology of liberation, which requires cultural and ethical creativity and new spirituality (pp. 100, 109). To this we can add, the decolonially unbound minds and bodies allowing the endangered human species to at least leave the Earth in dignity. The Asian Century will probably be an important intermediary stage in this major shift.

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### Notes

1. Later this concern and the necessity of dividing the post-colonial studies from the decolonial option was put into the center of a book chapter we co-authored with Walter D. Mignolo on the logic of coloniality and the limits of postcoloniality (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2007).
2. In Figure 1, Putin is in an unlikely company of the Russian 19th century religious thinker Vladimir Solovyev and Soviet period onomatodoxic philosopher Alexey Losev. Solovyev's quote literally says that the purpose of power is not to make society into an Eden but to prevent it from becoming a hell, whereas Losev is attributed with the idea that knowing the thorny path of our country and the agonizing years of the struggle, poverty and suffering, we realize that for the true children of the motherland all of this is their own, inherently their own and native. They live with it and die with it and they are precisely this and this is them. However, Putin's aphorism beats it all: "Too often in national history instead of the opposition to power we face the opposition to Russia itself and we know too well in what it has always resulted in history—the demolition of the state itself."

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