Book Review: “Internal Colonization. Russia’s Imperial Experience”

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Internal Colonization. Russia’s Imperial Experience

Alexander Etkind.


“A Russian in Europe is like a cockroach. He is running, moving his whiskers, nervously smelling. He is scandalous for Europe’s clean surface. Europe can contemplate with interest the exotic insects, it would like some kind of poisonous tarantula or a caterpillar, ladybirds are a touching site for it, but there are no good cockroaches…”

Victor Yerofeyev Five Rivers of Life

Alexander Etkind’s works are well known both to Russian readers and to Slavists in Europe and the US. In this present, ambitious and controversial project, Etkind attempts to enrich postcolonial theory with new concepts by introducing the Russian imperial experience into the postcolonial scope rather than simply applying postcolonial theoretical constructs to the analysis of the Russian context. The reader will know the purport of Etkind’s approach to the problem of the Russian empire from his previous publications [Etkind 2001, 2003]. He departs from the dominant trope of the internal colonization of Russia, itself an old and worn-out imperial strategy of self-white-washing. The core of this strategy is to treat the colonized territory as space devoid of the human factor by removing inhabitants from view. By that token it becomes possible to
claim that Russia did not exist before its presumable self-colonization. Etkind’s main contribution to this long-lasting discussion is his philological, poststructuralist attempt to deconstruct the trope of self-colonization itself.

Etkind’s book is a reflection on what can be called Russia as a Janus-faced empire or an empire-colony. The author chooses to follow the established mainstream of postcolonial theory of the 90s, not considering developments which could serve more productively the task of grasping the gist of Russia’s imperial history. Especially that concepts elaborated within the decolonial option, e.g. Russia as the empire entangled in an array of inferiority complexes in relation to the Western capitalist empires of modernity help understand the contradictory nature of Russian imperialism. Russia emerges in these studies as a subaltern empire mimicking and reproducing the colonial difference in relation to its own non-European colonies [Tlostanova 2010]. Likewise, key anti-colonial (or decolonial) thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois or Frantz Fanon, and even postcolonial ones, like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, are often re quoting from secondary sources, always a dubious move for an established scholar.

Etkind prefers to rely on the postmodernist wing of postcolonial theory and, symptomatically, does not address contributions from non-Western scholars. This choice, together with a curious comparative idea where Etkind does refer to W. E. B. Du Bois or Frantz Fanon, but he associates them most inappropriately with Lenin and Dostoyevsky, is determined by a historically decontextualized textual analysis and lack of sensitivity to the key discrepancy of their intellectual and ideological grounds. Moreover, and again rather symptomatically, Foucault and Arendt always prevail in Etkind’s text over Bhabha and Said, and Dostoyevsky’s madman usurps the place of the silent and missing subaltern, brought back in this book to its original Gramscian class (or in his case estate) meaning [Etkind 2011, 198].

Admittedly, the author comes very close to formulating the gist of Russia’s imperial difference and this empire’s peculiar colonial and, at the same time, imperial nature. Yet, he always stops short of the final step and remains inadvertently mystified by the Russian nobles’ foreignness to themselves, their reverse orientalization of the peasants and their persistent self-orientalization. What seems to be missing from getting to the core of the contradictory nature of Russian imperialism is the concept of the external imperial difference which would help explain why the British compared Russia with India and not with themselves. Internal colonization, in contrast, is just a small part of this complex schizophrenic configuration which F. Dostoyevsky expressed in his well-known words conspicuously missing in Etkind’s book: “In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, in Asia we shall also go as masters” [Dostoyevsky 2002, 161]. In the light of the existing research on colonialism, it is reductive to explain the specific Russian imperial and colonial inter-sectionality only through the concept of internal colonization. As much as Etkind wants to separate class, estate and religion from the categories which he feels uncomfortable with, such as race, gender, and ethnicity, it proves to be impossible in the end in the experience
Despite these reservations concerning the author’s selective treatment of postcolonial and decolonial thought, the book has its undeniably priceless parts. A fascinating chapter “Barrels of Fur” develops an anthropological, socio-economic and, at the same time, imperial-colonial explanation of the Russian model of natural resources exploitation economy which in the last 500 years has replaced Europe-bound barrels of fur with barrels of wheat and, finally, barrels of oil. In this model, territories have always been more important than people and the state has fully monopolized these economic processes. Etkind attempts to retrace the history of the colonization of Siberia, seldom figuring in any postcolonial texts and did not forget to mention the genocide of the indigenous peoples and the accompanying ecological catastrophes. He reintroduces several unknown or forgotten names of Russian and Creole historians, who were Orientalists or anthropologists questioning the official imperial ideology, such as Pavel Milyukov, Matvey Ljubavsky, Nikolay Yadrintsev, and, particularly, Afanassy Schapov, one of the first to write about bloodshed in the colonization of Siberia and to demonstrate what today would be called an ecological consciousness in his idea of zoological economy, i.e. the complementary annihilation of fur-providing animals and indigenous people who were forced to hunt them. Etkind summarizes such a vision of colonization as “parallel histories of peoples moved, animals exterminated, and plants cultivated” [Etkind 2011, 66]. Schapov seems to have fulfilled the role of the Russian Fernando Ortiz, developing his version of transculturation and his story of creolization of Russians in the process of Siberian colonization. Rather unfortunately, though, the history of Spanish colonialism falls out of the realm of the core postcolonial theory on which Etkind relies, and makes the author look for the blueprint into the history of the British colonization of India or North America. A major asset of Etkind’s book that should be underlined is his skeptical attitude to progressivism and an awareness that progressivism and violence are just two sides of the same coin of modernity. This skepticism seems to ground the author’s critical stance toward, in general, the disciplinary ideological premises of the Russian social sciences and the humanities – both and present. However, his own position remains vague, as he is careful to avoid any overt ideology regarding it as a characteristic flaw of postcolonial theory, choosing, instead, a familiar anti-Soviet, demonstratively disengaged, academic objectivism. This makes the book too lightweight at times, and, paradoxically, still politicized, in the end even biased, as the author does not see point blank the real colonial policy of the Soviet Union directed to the non-Russians in the republics-colonies but compares instead the GULAG prisoners and the subalterns.

What stands out is the author's blindness to race, and it is not as innocent as it might seem in a book attempting to include scholarship on the Russian empire in the postcolonial discourse. Ignoring race in the Russian imperial and colonial history does not eliminate it as a problem which is getting more and more serious. Sooner or later scholars will have to take up the task of defining the distorted racial mechanisms in the Russian empire and the USSR, if only to make sense of the present renaissance of biological racism in the post-Soviet Russia. This leads to another questionable position - Etkind is careful to detach his reflection on the Russian empire
from any associations with the Soviet Union presenting the latter as a postcolonial country and refusing to see the obvious continuity between the imperial tactics of the Czarist and Bolshevik ideologues. The effect is that he uncritically reproduces the most blatant rhetoric of the Soviet empire at face value. This outdated position is annoying, even worrying, considering studies successfully deconstructing the Soviet colonialist strategies, such as Kalpana Sahni’s book on Russian orientalism [Sahni 1997] which is included in Etkind’s bibliography, but does not seem to effect his argument. In Part III Etkind juxtaposes the institution of race and that of estate in the Russian empire. Studying the case of estates, Etkind carefully avoids those events and phenomena which have always demonstrated the peculiar Russian practice of racism, and focuses his attention, instead, on ethnically Russian and religiously Orthodox strata. He does not take into account the so-called *inorodtsy* – those born as others - who made exactly an ethnic-racial category because even if they adopted Christianity, they remained others and could not change their estate. Etkind develops the tactics of narrowing down the choice of material to only some social groups and of the deliberate ignoring of colonial (racial) others.

These are traces of coloniality of knowledge [Mignolo, 2000] in which modernity is grounded. Etkind reproduces this logic concentrating only on one side of the complex multi-directional Russian imperial-colonial matrix, ignoring all the rest, which is, precisely, the dynamic intersections of imperial and colonial processes in Russia and the USSR. The lack of a wider, more global context of inter-imperial interactions is a general problem of this otherwise genuinely interesting and historically thorough book. As a result, the theoretical framework of this study is anything but satisfactory. The author does not follow, or even mention, the new developments in the theory of imperialism, comparative colonialism, world system analysis, critical race studies, Latin American or Indian Subaltern studies, post-continental philosophy and other more recent approaches. His method is to rely on fairly dated historical books on the subject and frame the whole within a disengaged poststructuralist theory. A serious implication of this neglect can be observed in historically questionable lack of differentiation between various types of colonialism and imperialism coming from different local histories (e.g. his lumping together the Roman empire and modern capitalist empires, especially without making any distinction between Russia or the Ottoman Sultanate and the first-class empires of modernity such as the British empire).

As a result of this characteristic lack of attention to the intersecting problems of race, colonialism and othering, Etkind falls into the trap of confusing Russian colonialists and local subalterns, or the colonizers and the colonized. Not even once can we hear a voice of a Caucasian, a Central Asian, a representative of indigenous peoples of the Far North or any other real subaltern. Instead, the author provides a detailed account of Saltykov-Schedrin’s essay *Tashkenters* which has nothing to do with Uzbeks but, rather, is a cover-up satire on Russian colonial administrators. This confusion stems directly from the author’s lack of understanding of the subaltern empire’s power matrixes and his willingness to take out one small aspect – the internal colonization – and present it as the defining one.
Etkind correctly suspects that internal colonization as a sort of hermeneutical metaphor could raise some doubts among scholars of imperialism and colonialism, and takes care to support it with the historical authority of mostly imperial ideologues, which in itself makes one wonder why he shows so little criticism toward imperial historiography. In this sense there is an inner contradiction between Etkind the postmodernist and Etkind the traditional historian of culture, still believing in the objectivity of historical “facts” (myths) and using them as a legitimation of his very analysis of this mythology.

Etkind’s book is an attempt to combine under one cover the works which are often very different in their thematic, disciplinary and ideological dimensions, but share the central idea of the internal colonization as the model of the Russian empire where the state colonizes its people. This approach, however, that has developed into a theory, bypasses the historically documented experience of the colonial others of the Russian empire. It is amazing how many different exotic colonies and pseudo-colonies Etkind regards in his text – from military to utopian, from peasant to German. One aspect of Russian imperialism remains untouched - the imperial-colonial relations marked by racial, religious, cultural and not merely social differences. The book in the end promises what it cannot fulfill, leaving the reader with a fragmented, essayistic and unequal assortment of chapters, often comprised of known (to Russian rather than European readers) historical details or curious anecdotal facts, which in the end do not make up any unified whole.

One of the obvious assets of Etkind’s book is his reflection on the specific Russian double orientalism directed both against Russia itself and within Russia – against its own internal otherness, which the author understands as provincial Russia, deep countryside, peasant life and, especially, sensational exotic stories of marginal sects and sectarian separatism seen as a struggle for autonomy and independence from the state. He is even ready to interpret Orientalism positively when it has an exotic and not a demonizing flavor. For some reason Etkind does not notice the third kind of Orientalism, the one very close to what postcolonial theorists write about – the Orientalism directed against Russia’s South – the Caucasus, and its Orient – Central Asia. Shunning this straightforwardly postcolonial narrative, the author dwells at length on the psychoanalytic transfer of the “noble savage” identity onto the Russian serf, especially if this serf happens to be a member of some fanatical sect that Etkind knows all about as is obvious from his interesting book on Khlyst sect and the revolution [Etkind 1998].

The affinity between the social role of Russian serfs and African American slaves was noticed/observed as early as in the 19th century. However, the devil is in the detail and those are quite different and make the comparison limp at best. The author states that neither the state nor anyone else in Russia thought of the serfs as subhuman or non-Christian [Etkind
assuming that it was the case with African Americans. The fact is that Christianization of either Africans or Amerindians has never prevented the White masters from dehumanizing the colonized, and Etkind seems to realize this when on the very next page he states: “the orientalization of serfs was part of the cognitive machinery of serfdom: treating humans like property one needed to construct difference between them and oneself” [Etkind 2011, 106]. Subsequent chapters confirm dehumanization and racialization of the serfs by the Russian noble class, despite the author’s initial disclaimers. This tendency to formulate an opinion later to abandon it halfway or even provide an opposite historical material is quite striking in some parts of this book, as are decontextualized comparisons, one striking example of which is the “self-colonizing” Russia paralleled with the American Frontier, of Tambov province with Southern plantations, both historically and structurally questionable.

Although Etkind uses a large number of historical sources, in the end one cannot find any voices of postcolonial theoreticians writing on Russia in his book, except for David Chioni Moor’s early, unchallenging, but widely quoted article. The narrow circle of Etkind’s sources mostly comes down to the post-Soviet diasporic émigré Slavists and ex-Sovietologists, whereas other disciplinary and ideological fields remain unaddressed by the author, particularly if this refers to the works written by contemporary Russian and post-Socialist scholars such as Alexey Penzin’s attempt to present the post-soviet subject as the new subaltern of the global world, Dorota Kolodziejczyk’s conceptualizing of the post-communist and post-colonial through the idea of post-dependence.

Etkind could not avoid the question of serfdom which constitutes the core of Russian/Soviet imperial mythology, however, powerfully challenged by race-informed studies of non-Russian (ex-Soviet) republics. Etkind, misses out on this aspect of the debate. The imperial serfdom myth is grounded in the victimization of Russian serfs and the proclamation of their martyr-status in the empire. In the USSR the same myth was expressed in the idea of the Russian people’s extreme suffering and carrying on their backs the idle and underdeveloped Caucasians and Central Asians. There is, sadly, no place within the framework of this mythology for mentioning the genocide and deportation of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus during the colonization, the destruction of the traditional ways of life and economic and ecological systems of Central Asia, the forceful building of mono-economic models (e.g. a cotton economy) and colonialist glass ceilings. The subaltern empire was not confident from the start and was scared of several decades of decolonial liberation movements in the Caucasus, while its final victory coincided with the abolition of serfdom and also slave trade in the rest of the world. So it was difficult for Russia to keep up with its European pretenses, however unjustified and unrecognized by Europe they remained, and enslave millions at the same time. The annexation of Turkistan took place already after the abolition of serfdom, which did not
prevent Russia from squeezing the local population out of its newly confiscated lands to nowhere with no means of survival. But all this is not relevant for Etkind as it contradicts his model of internal colonization.

Postcolonial critics have long been using Kant and Hegel as negative examples of Eurocentric philosophy, ontologically and epistemically negating the colonial other. However, in a chapter provocatively entitled “Shaved Man’s Burden” Etkind offers an unexpected portrait of Kant as the first anti- and post-colonial thinker who lost his ability to write in those five years when Konigsberg was captured by the Russian army. Kant’s suffering of the self-negating double consciousness a la Dubois is certainly something no one thought of before. But the false analogy somehow falls apart, lacking any elements of real imperial-colonial asymmetries whose core strategy is the absolute othering grounded in racism. In the discussed example of Koenigsberg the case was quite different - the Russian Czarina Elizabeth (German in blood) offers the “colonized” Prussians to move to Russia, i.e. to the metropolis! This is a manifestation of the imperial difference and hierarchy in the raw. The non-confident colonizer (Russia) feels itself in Europe as a paradigmatic Victor Yerofeyev’s cockroach (see the epigraph), whereas its five-year occupation of Konigsberg is interpreted as an introduction of Russia (the colonizer) to modernity (through the colonized). However, all of this still cannot make Kant a postcolonial thinker...

The last part of the book is a literary-critical, comparative exercise in a close-reading quest for the often strained plot similarities in manifestly dissimilar texts of Russian and Western writers who are usually deconstructed in postcolonial works (Etkind compares the transporting of serfs along Volga and Oka with the Middle Passage, Conrad’s “heart of darkness” is likened to Penza’s “heart of sadness” and Dobrolyubov’s “dark kingdom”, and the runaway serf Flyagin from Leskov’s *Enchanted Wanderer* becomes the speaking subaltern). One must admit, however, that in his analysis of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* Etkind correctly states the importance of the multilayered experience of Russian colonialism in which the roles of the colonizer and the colonized repeatedly flipped [Etkind 2011, 218] for the shaping of Conrad’s specific stereoscopic vision. This is crucial, because here Conrad’s body-politics and geo-politics of knowledge come forward in the work where he does not seem to speak of Poland and his experience of the Russian colonized subject at all. The final section on sacrificial plotlines will be interesting for gender scholars. It is based on Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Rene Girard’s theories applied to canonical texts of Russian literature. The author is certainly right to point out the connection between the internal colonization model and the specific gender relations presented in Russian literature. It seems in the end that the whole internal colonization model works best of all in the interpretation of Russian literature. However, it would be far-fetched to call Russian literature a postcolonial one as Etkind sometimes seems to imply, neglecting the difference between anti-imperial and postcolonial fiction in points of agency, language, or positionality.
All in all, Etkind’s book is addressed to the scholars of Russia more than to postcolonial or decolonial thinkers. Alas, interdisciplinary dialog is still quite poorly developed in the area of Slavic studies which remains one of the most homogeneous disciplines. In this context, Etkind’s book is certainly a large step forward in the direction of intersectionality and transdisciplinarity. In a more global and up-to-date scholarly context of post-, decolonial and post-dependence studies the book is way too conventional and descriptive both in disciplinary and epistemological sense. Moreover, it may create a rather distorted impression of Russia and its ex- and present colonies in the minds of the scholars interested in imperial and colonial configurations of modernity.

The book is invaluable for those English speaking readers who do not know much about Russian history and its founding myths (such as the Rurik [story]dynasty). Here they will find everything in one place, enriched with the author’s lucid commentary. There is not much new in this concise presentation of the Russian imperial history, but the author did a very good job of selecting interesting and little-known material and putting together authentic historical voices in a coherent and entertaining way, accessible to undergraduate students as well as to a wider public.

References:


[1] The term creole comes from Central and South American local history and today mostly refers to the progeny of mixed cultural and ethnic origins of White settlers and Amerindians or

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