

MAGDA SZCZEŚNIAK

Fake it Till You Make it: The Trouble with the Global East Category

The article engages in a discussion with Martin Müller's article *In Search of a Global East* through the categories of class and class distinction. While recognizing the potential political value of the "Global East" project, the author questions the ideological mechanisms which naturalize the stereotype of "Eastness as forsakenness." As she points out, one of the effects of the "political and epistemological project" of the North–South divide (as well as stereotypical categorizations of the East) is obscuring the internal class dynamics of Northern, Southern and Eastern societies. In contrast, introducing class analysis – which includes examining such practices as producing and buying counterfeits of original, luxury-brand commodities – allows us to uncover similar patterns of class distinction and reproduction across global capitalist societies of the North, South and East, and perhaps also to forge solidarities amongst classes which are regularly oppressed by the dominant global capitalist order.

Keywords: post-socialism; Global East; counterfeit; neoliberalism; class analysis

“How to best recognize a counterfeit? By its owner.” This quote from a member of the Polish business elite, owner of a chain of high-end supermarkets (since gone bankrupt) and importer of luxurious brands, became an – admittedly unusual – guiding thought of my book on the ideological framework of post-socialism in Poland and its leading social actor: the new middle class. Through the counterfeit – both object and figure – I began to grasp the discriminatory logic of the transition from socialism to capitalism, its simultaneous lure and futility, its potential and insurmountable obstacle (Szcześniak 2016). Counterfeit commodities started appearing at Polish marketplaces in the late 1980s – Uma and Abibas sneakers, four-stripe tracksuits, Leviis jeans, Lorelaj cosmetics and many others. Not recognized as fakes in the beginning, they were instead treated as attractive, Western-looking commodities. Several years into the transition, counterfeits began to function as a prime example of our inability to practice capitalism properly. Either willingly buying fakes, and thus maliciously failing to abide by the (supposedly logical) rules of capitalist markets, or unintentionally mistaking counterfeits for originals, and thus lacking a skilled enough eye to recognize the (supposedly obvious) difference between them, Poles were regularly chastened as immature consumers. Admonished by corporate representatives, journalists and fashion experts, Poles were schooled in the necessity of always choosing the branded commodity over its cheaper cousins. At the same time, the counterfeit – and its synonyms: fake, copycat, knock-off, imitation – became a popular insult used in the new liberal media against all those who, while aspiring to be “European,” failed to meet “European standards”. Polish democracy, Polish politicians and businessmen, Polish fast-food joints, Polish action films and advertisements, the Polish artworld, Polish marketplaces and other public spaces were all accused of being mere counterfeits of Western modernity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both discussions were steeped in East-phobia: fake sneakers, jeans and perfumes were routinely described as “made in Asia” and now “flooding our markets” (as if Western brands were actually produced in the West) or as “cheap and kitschy chinoiserie”. To describe an institution or space as Eastern or Asian was an obvious affront. During the transition, much discursive energy was geared towards forcefully separating ourselves from the East and proving our historical connection to the West (Kiossev 2008). The counterfeit became a symbol of unsuccessful transition.

Constantly accused of faking it, were we ever going to make it? If Western ‘normality’ was the original, could we ever become ‘the real thing’? The answer, of course, was no. As many theorists of the post-

-socialist transition have pointed out, the game had been rigged from the start (Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002). The East could not become the West. Not only because the West's long and exhausting road to late 20th century capitalism could not be re-performed (even if many of its elements, such as rapid industrialization had paradoxically been carried out by the socialist state), but also because structurally the East's position as peripheral in relation to central capitalist economies was, in many ways, beneficial for the latter (e.g. as a source of cheaper labor). And thus, as Martin Müller writes in his intervention into the conceptual geopolitical map dividing the late capitalist world into the Global North and Global South: "countries in the East may be on the way northward, but at the same time seem stuck in eternal transition towards an elusive modernity" (736). By introducing the category of the Global East, which "encompass[es] societies that took part in what was the most momentous global experiment of the twentieth century: to create communism," Müller hopes to question "the political and epistemological project" of the North–South divide, drawing attention to a region that doesn't neatly fit into this widely accepted scheme. The Global East is neither as wealthy and advanced as the North, nor as poor and under-developed as the South (the parameters for demarcating these areas remain somewhat traditional, or at best vague, in Müller's article). Although the East undoubtedly exists within a network of global relations, it enjoys relatively little interest from either academics or the general global public. The fascination once kindled by socialism as a counter-project to capitalism – one fueling either admiration or disgust – has been withering away with every consecutive anniversary of the "fall" of the Berlin Wall. Today, as Müller shows through his – again, rather subjective and generalizing¹ – emotional and sensual geopolitical mapping, the East evokes only lukewarm feelings and associations. If the South is considered "cool," "sexy," "dynamic," the East is perceived as "dull," "grey" and "boring" (737). Like many well-written interventions into established academic disciplines and reified beliefs, Müller's essay is an enjoyable read, delivering a necessary correction to the obvious omission or even exclusion of the East from the "circuits and conduits

1 One such generalization is a comparison of the recognizability of randomly chosen Southern (Coetzee, Marquez, Vargas Llosa) and Eastern (Alexievich, Müller, Szymborska) Nobel Prize in Literature Laureates. According to the author, the three Southern authors have a "ring of instant recognition", while the Eastern names "sound outlandish". If we even were to agree with this weakly founded statement, perhaps we should then also take into account the gender of the mentioned authors as a factor playing into the level of their popularity.

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of Western knowledge architecture” (737). For those of us devoted to researching these swaths of “grey” lands and various micro- and macro communities in the East, it provides a sort of compensatory pleasure, a well-deserved (so we think) appreciation of the specificity (if not uniqueness) of our objects of interest.

But while I did experience a pleasant tingle of recognition, I also couldn’t shake the feeling that Müller’s search for the Global East has somewhat unspecified goals and is modelled on generalizing claims. Perhaps because the author doesn’t seem interested in uncovering the ideological mechanisms behind stereotypical categorizations which allows the North to see the East as “gray”, to define “Eastness as a feeling of forsakenness and of disconnection” (741). Although Müller seems conscious of the contrived character of these associations, the unobviousness of sensing “Eastness” in “highway overpasses, waiting rooms of neglected bus stations, basements” located in the Global North, he doesn’t ask what kind of work of erasure is being performed through this sensual pairing of neglect and “Eastness”. The sight of trash in potholes brimming with dirty water, the heaviness and murkiness of smog-filled air, the stench of over-flowing garbage bins, the on-and-off buzzing of flickering, half-working street lights, the faded colors and threadbare feel of upholstery in public transport – these are not elements of a sensual map of the East, but of neglected spaces of a failed modernity, both post-socialist and capitalist. Associating them with “Eastness”, as if they were branches of some “Museum of the East” unexpectedly popping up in the public spaces and institutions of the Global North, conceals the structural conditions of the proliferation of neglected spaces over the last couple of decades, which – unsurprisingly – appear primarily in neighborhoods occupied by working class communities or their workplaces. Perhaps then, one of the effects of the “political and epistemological project” of the North–South divide (as well as stereotypical categorizations of the East) is obscuring the internal dynamics of Northern, Southern and Eastern societies. Aided by such indexes as GDP, or even traditionally calculated unemployment rates (which fail to account for the everyday tragedies of the “working poor”), we’re prevented from seeing the poor of the North and the wealthy of the East and South.

Meanwhile, uncovering the dynamic of seemingly obvious and innocent generalizations, their power to determine what we categorize as Northern, Southern and Eastern, can bring into view the structural similarity of inequality within these supposedly radically different realities. Even for those still cherishing an idealistic visualization of the developed North, images of encampments of homeless people in San Fran-

cisco, reports from overburdened hospitals in working class New York City neighborhoods during the COVID-19 pandemic, or documentations of the strikingly powerful gilets jaunes protests, have to bring home the realization that the defining partitioning lines of the contemporary world do not only run along lines of regional borders, but primarily along divisions of class and race. Although undisputedly class dynamics have their national and regional manifestations (the European ones brought into view recently by Cédric Hugrée, Etienne Pénissat and Alexis Spire (2019)), thinking of the Global North, South and East cannot avoid engaging in a strong theorization of class dynamics.

Let us try and see how introducing a class perspective – absent in Müller’s article – broadens and problematizes our view of the post-socialist transition, a process often visualized as a road leading from backward and dilapidated socialism to modern capitalism. Müller recognizes the weakness of this metaphor, portraying the East as “stuck in eternal transition,” as if the road we were ushered on in 1989 was a bypass with no exits, constantly circling the West. However, although the transition was never realized as a universal project², the professed riches did materialize for some social groups, resulting in a reorganization of class structure and hierarchies. Although class proportions in Eastern and Western Europe differ, with Western Europe (but not the European South!) closer to achieving the self-professed dream of “a Europe without proletarians” (Hugrée, Pénissat, and Spire 2019), over the past thirty years the East has in fact produced an upper and a middle class, which is in many ways similar to the dominant classes of the West. To stretch the tired traffic metaphor even further – some were in fact able to take the express lane to the West.³ Ideological work was an essential element of the transition and its class reorganization – introducing and naturalizing the new worldview, centered around middle-class values; critiquing the old system and shaming its institutions, practices and lifestyles; foregrounding some groups (the new middle class) and obscuring others (the industrial working class which wanted to be heard and yet was structurally silenced, *and* the dominant

2 On an ideological level, the transition was advertised as a model of creating an almost all-encompassing middle class – in reality though it seems that the planners of the transition must have accounted for (and accepted) class hierarchies and inequalities as an obvious element of every capitalist society. See Szcześniak 2015.

3 The conditions of this ability were rooted both in the class structure of the previous system, as well as in the conditions set by influential actors of the new system. See: Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley 2000; Kennedy 2002.

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upper class which preferred to remain invisible). Although dabbling in class analysis was considered outdated and inappropriate – including in academia where Marxist theory was thoroughly eradicated – in reality class hierarchies and distinctions were under constant debate. To return to my opening example: the counterfeit became one of the categories used to produce class differentiation without every really using class language. Those who could afford original Western brands were deemed as appropriate members of the capitalist society, subjects who had already transitioned; those who couldn't (or didn't care to) were seen as stuck in the past (see the popularity of the derogatory phrase *homo sovieticus*). The transition, in all its globality, played itself out on individual bodies, which either looked like the modern well-off owner of original Adidas shoes and Levi's jeans or didn't. After all, a counterfeit can be easily recognized by looking at its owner. Of course – and here Müller's global categories come in handy – this valuation system was far from natural and, in fact, benefitted precisely those who set its terms: global capital. In the early 1990s, one of the few life savers of local Eastern textile factories was a quick adaptation to the new valorization systems: either by producing counterfeits of Western brands or by creating new Western-named brands which were able to *pass as* Western without “borrowing” already existing logotypes.

The heated temperature of post-socialist discussions focused on the counterfeit shows that the belief in the unequivocal superiority of West (and Western originals) over the East (and Eastern knockoffs) was necessary for maintaining the domination of Western capitalism, which had emerged victorious from the long Cold War. Simultaneously, the possibility of an Eastern fake successfully *passing as* a Western commodity destabilized these seemingly obvious and natural categories, the basic tenets of contemporary consumer practices in global capitalism. If — the counterfeits seemed to be asking us — we look so much like the “real thing” then what is it that makes the original worth a small fortune? What makes Pumas better than Umas? As I discovered in my research of ethnographies of counterfeiting, it is in the Global East and South that alternative practices towards commodity capitalism emerge, ranging from the in-your-face aesthetic irony of Indian garment makers who adorn clothes with a collage of logotypes of well-known Western companies (Nakassis 2012), through complex new value systems of commodities based either on the quality and longevity of products (Vann 2006) or their place of production and its distance from the place of consumption (Pine 2002), to a straightforward and unashamed embrace of counterfeiter identity as a subversive actor in an unjust economic

system (Crăciun 2014) and a tactical use of fakes in infiltrating the separated off realms of the dominant classes (Brandtstädter 2009; Pinheiro-Machado 2010). Of course, counterfeiting and consuming counterfeits constitute one distinct set of practices in the semi-peripheral economies of the Global East and South. Could uncovering more practices and identities, denaturalizing the seeming obviousness of global capitalism and its hierarchies, be one of the projects carried out under the banner of the strategically essentialist Global East, as proposed by Müller?

I'm speculating, since the author of *In Search of a Global East* does not provide us with an answer to what "the political project of reclaiming a voice for the East" (743) would look like. What is to come of "embracing liminality" (750)? What would be the essence of our emancipatory project and what elements would a strategically essentialist Eastern identity be comprised of? The fact of participating in global relations and networks – an obvious trait of all societies participating in the neoliberal order – does not seem enough. If a common Eastern identity is meant to serve a strategic goal larger than the reframing of (admittedly oppressive) architectures of knowledge, then the ground on which it is sown must be fertile. In other words, we must try to imagine the Global East as a sphere of productive and positive projects of the commons, not only as a space of a shared aspiration to "be like the West". The attempt to carry out "the most momentous global experiment of the twentieth century" could be seen as such, regardless of our assessment of its outcome. Searching for other elements could entail looking at the peasant revolts across centuries of gentry domination, workers' movements of the 20th century, the queer counterpublics of socialism and post-socialism, as well as such seemingly minute practices as consuming counterfeits. Such a conceptualization of the Global East, while acknowledging its location in the global system and local specificity, could perhaps forge solidarities amongst those groups which are regularly excluded by the dominant global capitalist order – in the Global North, South and East.

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MAGDA SZCZEŚNIAK – Assistant Professor at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw. Author of *Norms of Visibility: Identity in Times of Transition* (Warsaw 2016) devoted to Polish post-socialist visual cultures and the ideological framework of the transition into neoliberalism. Currently working on a book devoted to the politics of representing upward and downward social mobility in socialist Poland. Recipient of grants and awards from the Fulbright Foundation, National Science Center in Poland, Ministry of Higher Education and Science and the “Polityka” Academic Award.

Address:

Institute of Polish Culture
University of Warsaw
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warsaw
email: magda.szczesniak@uw.edu.pl

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Autor: Magda Szczesniak

Tytuł: Udawaj, aż stanie się to prawdą: Problemy z kategorią globalnego wschodu

Abstrakt: Artykuł podejmuje dyskusję z tekstem Martina Müllera, wprowadzając do namysłu nad pojęciem „globalnego wschodu” kategorię klasy i dystynkcji klasowej. Uznając potencjał polityczny projektu proponowanego przez Müllera, autorka podważa – częściowo powtórzone w jego artykule – ideologiczne mechanizmy naturalizujące stereotyp „Wschodu jako poczucia opuszczenia” (*Eastness as forsakenness*). Autorka zwraca uwagę, że jednym z efektów „politycznego i epistemologicznego projektu” podziału na Globalną Północ i Południe (oraz stereotypowych ujęć Wschodu) jest zaciemnianie podziałów klasowych wewnątrz północnych, południowych i wschodnich społeczeństw. Wprowadzenie analizy klasowej – uwzględniającej również takie jak praktyki kupowania i produkowania podróbek luksusowych marek – pozwala odkryć podobne wzory klasowej dystynkcji oraz reprodukcji klasowych hierarchii społeczeństw globalnego kapitalizmu. Może również pozwolić na zadziwienie opartych na solidarności relacji pomiędzy klasami regularnie prześladowanymi przez dominujący porządek globalnego kapitalizmu.

Słowa kluczowe: postsocjalizm; Globalny Wschód; podróbka; neoliberalizm; analiza klasowa