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The Essentialist Masturbation: Can the Global East Get any Satisfaction?

While agreeing with Martin Müller's intent of filling the gap in contemporary social sciences that the lack of interest in the Global East constitutes, the article engages in polemics with solution postulated by Müller. The Author argues for a conceptualization of the Global East that would not be based on its essence, but rather on its place in the global division of labor. The "strategic essentialism" postulated by Müller is refuted for three reasons: a reactionary character of identity politics as such, its capture by the Right and doubtful value of socio-cultural identity of most societies of Global East. Instead an alter-universalism is proposed that would be different from the colonial universalism of the West and focused on constructing a common front of progressive-emancipatory struggles.

Keywords: Global East, identity politics, capitalist world-system, essentialism, universalism, progressive politics, revolutionary politics

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There’s a bunch of proverbial anecdotes that you can hear every now and then among East European social scientists: ask an average person in “the West”, where the center of Europe is – a French person would point to Lyon, a German will hesitate between Frankfurt-on-Main and Nurnberg, while a Brit would probably believe it is – alas! – in Brussels. In Poland many hold that the geographical center of Europe is near Łódź and even if it is not a universally accepted fact, this instance of Polish patriotism is, surprisingly, closer to truth than what “people in the West” claim. Ask the same people what the biggest ethno-linguistic group in Europe is. A French person could reply that the Romance peoples (those speaking Roman languages deriving from Latin), a Swede would hold that it’s the Scandinavians, while for a Brit it would be Anglo-Saxon. As a matter of fact, the Slavs are the biggest.

Anecdotes like these and many others provoke a mix of disbelief in Western ignorance and a resentment that has become more and more articulate in Eastern Europe: so here we are, the biggest ethnic group in the center of Europe and... and nothing. These are a popular, unsophisticated symptoms of the same problem that animates Müller’s article *In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South*: there are big chunks of land, populated by large groups of people with their own unique cultures (“culture” here is understood in practical terms, as a shared way of life) that seem to occupy at best a marginal place in the imagination of privileged groups inhabiting “the West”, “the North”, “the center”, “the developed countries” “the first world” or whatever you want to call the countries belonging to the core of the capitalist world-economy. What is sometimes referred to as “the East” (or “former East”) provides us with a paradigmatic – even if not the one and only – example of such a “twilight zone” of the global imagination: a place everyone knows exists, but very few can say anything more than that.

There should be no disagreement with Müller that the geographical terms we are using to denote various “zones” or “spheres” are imprecise at best and misleading at worst: the global East would not be in the East only, just as the global North is also... in the south, like Australia. Obviously, patterns of social differentiation, though not completely detached from physical and spatial arrangements, do not follow neat geometrical divisions. The distribution of a given group always responds in some way to the immediate surrounding environment, but is also shaped by processes and factors that are of human making themselves. A great example is provided by James C. Scott in his investigation of Zomia, a mountainous zone of South-East Asia that was historically shaped by exodus from large state machines in

the lowlands. As Scott demonstrates, the spatial distribution of various tribes and groups seems to be bizarre and senseless when looked only in the horizontal dimension, as if people inhabited chaotic chunks of land whose shapes bring to mind rather Rorschach's test than any meaningful boundaries of any social entity. It looks very differently though when analyzed in the vertical dimension: it turns out that the given group inhabits lands laying at a certain altitude, which they settled when fleeing from the oppressive state apparatus controlling the valleys (for obvious reasons, the state likes flat areas, as it makes control, supervision and circulation much easier) (Scott 2009: 40–63). Thus although “territory” as a term evokes rather horizontal distribution, the territorial arrangements of Zomia are mainly operational in the vertical dimension, and their geographic logic is shaped much more by social than geometric circumstances. This is a typical example of the social production of space that has been explored by many authors in various domains, especially in the field of urban studies.

Thus if we want to understand the curious and problematic fate of the Global East, we need to think beyond geography and turn towards more systemic or structural explanations. The approach put forward by so-called dependency or system theories is an attempt to engage precisely at this point. Müller refers to Immanuel Wallerstein, but there are other theorists: Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank or – from the younger generation – Jason W. Moore. Of course, although the trichotomy of “center – semi-periphery – periphery” has many downsides, it remains the most elaborate and advanced shot at explaining the current fate of humanity in a manner that is both interconnected and critical. The fact that the structure does not mirror geography does not seem puzzling at all for the system/dependency approach, as “periphery” is more of a structural position than a spatial relation. This kind of approach that inherently and purposefully reveals hierarchizations and that diagnoses inequalities seems to be better poised for explaining the status quo than post-structuralist theories that stress horizontal dispersion, diversity and interconnectivity, like the ANT paradigm, for example. For a very simple reason: these hierarchies and inequalities constitute the absolute key element of the conundrum that we need to explain: the problem of the Global East is not to acknowledge its existence and affirm its unique identity in the horizontal plethora of cultures and societies, but to conceptually grasp its inferior status. Critical evaluation is necessary just for merely posing the problem and understanding it.

Another major advantage of adopting an approach similar to the one taken by Wallerstein is that it closely links the fate of the Global

East with the dynamics of capitalism (in Early Modern times it was the first “Third World”, since it provided raw materials, unprocessed goods and indirectly added cheap, unskilled labor to the production chains in the capitalist world-economy). This does not explain everything when it comes to the particular state of the societies of the Global East (I’ll return to this point later), but attempts at completely eradicating this materialist perspective are doomed to fail. The historical dynamics of the capitalist economy might not have been the only factor shaping global divisions, however, it has been constantly present and always exerting influence on every single human society in recent centuries. It is intriguing, for example, that the emergence of global electronic communication, which was supposed to be such a disruptive and revolutionary factor, has not reshaped the global redistribution of resources in any important way. It is not by accident that the major share of the profits generated by the digital economy are accumulating where capital was accumulating before: in the rich areas of the core economies like the US, Japan or Western Europe, and not in Mongolia or Chad. Free, uncontrolled communication has not generated a more diverse and balanced semiotic landscape but rather contributed to levels of centralization and standardization hitherto unseen in the history of humanity: a handful of companies – almost all of which are uniquely located on the West Coast of the US, with the leading five being Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple – are the conduits of communication, labor and leisure for half (or even more) of the world population. Every time anyone uses a smartphone, makes an internet search, sends an email or accesses pornography, the profits accumulate in very narrow zones of the highly developed economies of the global North. The center-periphery divide is articulated more clearly than ever before, despite the celebrations of horizontal rhizomes so popular in progressive academic circles.

While material conditions are always there, and always intervene in any human practice (and in this sense materialism constitutes an unsurpassable perspective in the human and social sciences), of course the economic perspective does not explain everything, all the time. Müller is right that in order to understand the fate of the East we need to address its particular circumstances and not only universal material forces. Once we do this, the picture becomes more complicated; that which seems to belong to the same category of rather neglected than dominated societies (which differentiates, according to Müller, the Global East from the postcolonial Global South) turns out to be very different in its particular position, especially when it comes to the possible autonomy of the

local vs the global. One case that I have examined very closely is that of Central-Eastern Europe being different from both the West and the East (mainly Russia) (Sowa 2011). The debate about “going with the West or sticking with our own culture”, which Clifford Geertz (1993) labeled as the conflict between “epochialism” (let’s go with the *Zeitgeist* of the epoch) and “essentialism” (let’s cultivate our unique, authentic identity regardless of what is going on elsewhere) was the very core of the debate between Westernism and Slavophilia in the Russian civilizational zone for much of the 19th and part of the 20th century. Poland, dominated by Russia until 1918, took part in these debates, however it was virtually impossible for Polish intellectuals to assume any positions in a meaningful way, since for Poland both eventualities entailed some kind of subjugation: to the West in the first instance or to Russia in the second. Thus, although both Poland and Russia seem to belong to the same category of the Global East (which is confirmed not only by their geographical proximity, but also by their shared experience of most of the 20th century events, such as the October Revolution, the Second World War, Bolshevik rule, and the transformation of the 1990s), their situation is very different. For complex historical reasons, Russia, with its recent and splendid imperial past, can reflect upon autonomy and authenticity, while Poland can only choose who will dominate it. So, obviously the very same heterogeneity that complicates neat divisions into the Center and the Peripheries also destabilizes the category of Global East. On the other hand, the core problem on the social and cultural level seems to be exactly the same as what the system theory diagnoses as the main economic obstacle: dependency. One of the key features of the Global East is its inability to assume its own and autonomous position. The Global South, although poorer, seems to be in a better situation in this respect because it is much further away from the dominating metropolitan areas, not only in terms of physical space, but mainly due to cultural affiliations (Kiossev 1999). The post-colonial, peripheral South is the “poor Other”, while we, the Eastern Europeans, are the “poor Same”, and as such we are ultimately unattractive: poor and un-sexy (because not exotic and different enough).

I believe it is symptomatic (and a very good thing) that voices like Martin Müller’s are becoming more and more articulate. Recent decades have brought a very mixed blessing to what we may provisionally label the Global East. When you look at the economic statistics, we are doing well or even very well – when it comes to Poland, for example, the 2020 coronavirus crisis broke almost three decades of constant, uninterrupted GDP growth, which is an amazing achievement on any scale, be it

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European or global. On the other hand, there is a widespread sense of defeat, resentment, disappointment and frustration, and other similar affects in Polish society. Apparently, the Global East can't get no satisfaction. Many find it puzzling that a booming economy goes hand in hand with such a lack of contentment. A Marxist finds it less surprising: the belief that smooth-functioning capitalism solves all problems is the key part of ideological screen of phantasy that capitalism builds to hide a much more inconvenient truth. But it goes further than that. What animates the right-wing populist revolt is a "What-the-Fuck???" kind of fury that is animated precisely by a feeling of inferiority, unimportance and lack of recognition. As was diagnosed by Martin Müller, the Global Eastern condition means that we went through painful economic reforms, we adjusted our institutions to the Western standard to be able to join the EU, we patiently went through humiliations of the so-called "accession process" when we were told by Western leaders like Jacques Chirac that our best option is to shut-up and not to comment on international policies adopted by Western powers. At the same time, we have achieved a brilliant macroeconomic success (or at least that's what the official propaganda says), we have the deepest diving pool and the biggest amusement park in Europe, and now are even building the highest building in the EU—but still, they (i.e. "the West") do not love us! They either remain ignorant of us and our great achievements (just think of Chopin – yes, he was Polish! – or Marie Curie – yes, she was Polish! – or John Paul II – at least everybody knows he was Polish!) or they actively affirm our civilizational inferiority, treating us only as a source of cheap labor (just think of "Polish plumber" in France, or the entire army of Polish migrant workers who constitute nowadays the biggest foreign-born group on the British Isles)¹.

Ironically, and deconstructibly, it needs to be acknowledged that our "achievements" in the last decades are intimately linked with our "failures": it is precisely the way we won our "prosperity" and "freedom" that is the source of our malaise and our unsatisfied need for recognition: we have done it by imitating. After all we just copied everything – our institutions were modeled after the Western liberal democracies, our laws were adjusted to EU standards, our economic transformation of the 1990s was designed by Jeffrey Sachs and David Lipton along the lines of the so-called Washington Consensus, we built malls and highways

¹ By the way, it could be interesting to compare the discourse about "the West" of Polish right-wing populists and the German AfD – most likely they would share a lot of similarities.

“just like the West” and our popular culture neatly imitated the Western (mainly American) model. This giant exercise in imitation was justified by the sociological thought of the time, namely the so-called modernization theory that affirmed it was normal and beneficial for some to lead and others to follow. Nevertheless imitation, as was recently argued and analyzed in detail by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2020), is a very tricky procedure – being a Xerox boy may allow you to succeed (after all, the history of life on Earth as such is a string of imitations and usurpations), but the amount of recognition and satisfaction (or *jouissance* if you want to put it in a more elaborate way) it can provide is very limited. Especially nowadays, when the hysteria of internet celebrity culture made everyone eager to be recognized for what they are (both left and right agree on that, differing only in their opinions of what should be an acceptable source of pride: one’s suffering and subjugation, combined with impeccable moral virtue, for left-wing identity politics; and tradition, combined with once’s particular culture, for right-wing identity politics).

The crucial question remains: What do we do with it all? Martin Müller also asks this question, citing Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism” as the answer. It’s here that I rather disagree. For three reasons. Firstly, the practical effects of the essentialist-identitarian turn of critical theory and activism are really regrettable. It has taken us to a painful cul-de-sac of identity politics that makes linking our struggles more and more difficult². Everyone wants to talk only about themselves and their particular predicaments; as a result, essentialist divisions have become unsurmountable frontiers pitching various subjugated groups against one another. Secondly, the tools and strategies of identity politics have been appropriated by the right. Right-wing populism is identity politics of the white. Fighting political, social and economic oppression with such tools nowadays is like organizing a marketing campaign to advertise the end of capitalism. The more success we have talking about our particular suffering and advancing our particular grievances the more attractive it becomes for the right to talk about their suffering and their particular grievances. It ends with Charlottesville and Portland: a bunch of the so-called white-trash and poor people of color killing one another while Wall Street thrives (or in another context: Hindu and Muslims aiming at mutual extermination while their land gets devoured by international capital). Don’t get me wrong: struggle is necessary and

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2 For an inspiring analysis of Black Lives Matter movement in this perspective, see Johnson 2017.

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legitimate, revolt is absolutely essential, antagonism is unavoidable, but a combination of essentialism and antagonism ends not with a revolutionary movement but with fascism. Marx claims that the proletariat is the revolutionary class, because, unlike the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy and all other classes before it, it aims not at remodeling the whole of society after itself (so that everyone should be a proletarian), but at such a structural transformation that would eliminate the position of the proletariat altogether. There is no room for essentialism here, no affirmation of the sanctity of labor, the worker's identity etc. Actually, such an attempt at "strategic essentialism" also happened within the workers movement and it gave birth to pathetic and corrupt syndicalism that was challenged by the workers themselves in the 1960s and 1970s (it is symptomatic that the biggest French trade union CGT chose to support de Gaulle against the revolt in May 1968). That's precisely where "strategic essentialism" ends: with essential strategic failure.

There is yet another obstacle — maybe the biggest one — in resorting to strategic essentialism when it comes to the Global East: is there really so much of essence in the societies of this zone, and is it enough for any viable alternative to be built on it? Being a member of such a society I strongly doubt it. It has become fashionable to act along the lines of epistemic justice and to look for solutions to our problems in the so-called indigenous knowledges. For sure, there are valuable insights to be found there but "indigenous=valuable" is hardly a general rule. In most parts, traditions tend to be fundamentally problematic while essentialism always needs to rely on the past (the essence of every cultural and social identity is, after all, shaped by past events and interactions). These pasts do not offer us enough to construct any meaningful strategy in any aspect, not even one of symbolic recognition and attractiveness. All they may offer is some sort of consolation: we know how great and morally impeccable we are! That is, however, a socio-political equivalent of masturbation – if nobody wants to have sex with you, you can always jerk-off. As long as you enjoy it, it is perfectly OK. However building lasting relationships based on masturbation does not seem to be the best possible idea.

What other option do we have? Trying to be faithful to the best traditions of critical thought and action, I'd say the very same one as those who struggled before us: to look for some kind of universalism in the practical form of internationalism. I understand that the very term "universalism", along with "modernity" or "reason", is unacceptable for the mainstream of contemporary critical theory, which is still shaped, much more than is acknowledged, by the central tenets of post-struc-

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turalism. A lot of criticism directed towards them is entirely legitimate and, of course, there can be no going back to any kind of colonial universalism. But just as there is alter-modernity – a minoritarian current that can be traced back to Spinoza and radical enlightenment – and anti-capitalist struggles undertaken over centuries can be understood as attempts to counter the fatal elements of capitalist modernity not with an anti-modern, but with an alter-modern project, there may also be a possibility for what we may label as “alter-universalism”, or for a “universalism of the subaltern”. The pertinent observation made by Martin Müller that the Global East is not only in the geographical East, can be a perfect starting point for building such an alter-universalism. So the question would not be how the East can fight against the West, but how people in the East and in the West can fight together against forces, institutions and arrangements that are detrimental for all of us, no matter what our skin color, gender or sexual orientation is. This new universalism of the subaltern is what the political meaning of “Global East” may become.

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Citation:

Sowa, Jan. 2020. “The Essentialist Masturbation: Can the Global East Get any Satisfaction?” *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4(38): 181–191.

DOI: 10.14746/prt2020.4.12

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Tytuł: Esencjalistyczna masturbacja: Czy Globalny Wschód może zaznać satysfakcji?

Abstrakt: Zgadzając się z postulowanym przez Martina Müllera uzupełnieniem luki we współczesnych naukach społecznych, jaką stanowi niewielkie zainteresowanie kondycją Globalnego Wschodu, artykuł podejmuje polemikę z zaproponowanym przez niego rozwiązaniem owego problemu. Autor proponuje spojrzenie na Globalny Wschód nie w kategoriach esencjalistycznych, ale poprzez pryzmat jego miejsca w międzynarodowym podziale pracy. „Strategiczny esencjalizm”, za którym opowiada się Müller, jest zdaniem Autora błędny ze względu na trzy związane z nim problemy: reakcyjny charakter polityki tożsamości jako takiej, jej przejście przez środowiska

prawicowe oraz wątpliwą wartość sporej części rozwiązań społeczno-kulturowych stanowiących historyczną tożsamość społeczeństw Globalnego Wschodu. Zamiast tego tekst proponuje konstrukcję alter-universalizmu, który dystansowałby się od uniwersalizmu kolonialnego Zachodu, koncentrując się na budowie wspólnego frontu walk postępowo-emancypacyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Globalny Wchód, polityka tożsamości, kapitalistyczny system-świat, esencjalizm, uniwersalizm, polityka postępowa, polityka rewolucyjna