On Public Intellectuals and Their Conceptual Frameworks

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As we bemoan the posited general social irrelevance of our humanistic disciplines (humanities and social sciences alike), the role of public intellectuals becomes crucial. They have simultaneously three hypostases: of scholars, moral philosophers, and consummate communicators. When properly done, their work should bridge the chasm between the ivory tower and the public. Public intellectuals have been defined differently. There is the lofty and exacting portrayal of Edward Said, who demands of public intellectuals "a relentless erudition," "a sense of the dramatic and the insurgent," being superior in debate, devoid of pomposity, meeting with self-irony "the inescapable reality" that they will make no friends in high places: "It is a lonely condition, yes, but it is always a better one than a gregarious tolerance for the way things are."[1] Against this, there is the neutral, more encompassing, almost anodyne depiction of Alan Lightman, devoid of any evaluation: "Such a person is often trained in a particular discipline, such as linguistics, biology, history, economics, literary criticism, and who is on the faculty of a college or university. When such a person decides to write and speak to a larger audience than their professional colleagues, he or she becomes a 'public intellectual.'"[2]

In his essay here, as well as his numerous public appearances and contributions, Timothy Snyder assumes the role of the public intellectual. While I would have loved to see him claim the exciting part scripted by Said, there is no doubt that he satisfies Lightman's criteria. But even in this minimal definition, the role of the public intellectual is a very difficult one, especially in keeping the necessary equilibrium between the *public* and the *intellectual.* Since Snyder indicates from the outset that he has engaged several dozen times in the public sphere on the issue of the Ukrainian crisis, I will address here the intellectual side of his essay, given that an academic journal such as *Slavic Review,* even as it seeks to open up to current and relevant public debates, (hopefully) still emphasizes the intellectual aspects.

Implicitly, Snyder's essay raises important questions about the relationship between scholarship and politics, between pundits and scholars, between hyperspecialized discourse and rhetoric. Explicitly, it is structured in a tripartite way. There is a conclusion that is used as a premise, linked by a scholarly argument to provide the proof. In logic this is called *circulus in probando*, that is, circular reasoning. What we have as a premise is a "true revolution," mass killing, Ukrainian revolutionaries dying for Europe, Russian counterrevolutionaries, and a foreign imperial invasion. This leads to a similar conclusion but on a higher pitch of acrimony and buttressed by a

1. Edward Said, *Representation of the Intellectual: The Reith Lectures* (New York, 1994), xviii.

2. Alan Lightman, "The Role of the Public Intellectual," MIT Communications Forum, at web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/lightman.html (last accessed July 15, 2015).

scholarly conceptual apparatus: a revolution of civil society connecting "individual agency, national identity, and political normativity" against its own dictatorial and murderous state, being forced into a defensive conflict in Russia's "traditionally colonial war," a project with an "explicit goal"—"to destroy Ukraine and the European Union in the name of an alternative global order." I take the premise and the conclusion as the *public* part, so in what follows I will concentrate on the *intellectual* argument in the middle. What is ironic is that here this public intellectual does not follow the usual way one is supposed to reach the public, namely, unwrapping a complex argument and translating it in a way the public can grasp it while at the same time retaining the complexity and providing a moral compass. What we have instead is a simple, not to say simplistic, argument, wrapped in an obfuscating scholarly garb that allegedly legitimizes it, so that at the end we encounter the same argument but also with a new theory and a "scholarly apparatus [that] might help us get some purchase on the phenomena of revolution and war and some distance from the alternative reality of propaganda, whose tropes can otherwise serve as a tempting substitute for thought." The claim is thus laid for a scholarly contribution, which is offered not to the broad public but to a particular audience—the academic readers of *Slavic Review*. This response is mainly addressed to this scholarly claim.

In his theoretical proposition, Snyder offers as an overall framework a binary opposition between integration and disintegration, which, in a bold conceptual leap, is translated into colonization and decolonization. These are, then, the main categories with which he operates throughout his essay. Let me deal consecutively with the two pairs of concepts. "A historical framework that permits Ukraine to be seen as a subject and an object of projects of integration and disintegration, as a link between European and global history," Snyder asserts, will facilitate understanding of the present conflict. "Integration and disintegration" is indeed the safer bet between the two pairs of dichotomies, and Snyder wisely uses it in his title, mainly because it is difficult to specify it historically. It is general enough to be universally applicable. But, then, what does it tell us concretely? How is it different from any cyclical (or even helical) view, from other dualities like centralization versus secession, conquest versus resistance, subjugation versus opposition, or the "rise and fall" genre? The Romans integrated the Mediterranean world and then disintegrated. Over several millennia China experienced several waves of integration (expansion) and disintegration (contraction). The Incas exerted imperial rule before they themselves were conquered by the Spanish. And this can be argued ad infinitum with endless historical examples, so the exercise becomes meaningless. Snyder's model, which creates a breathing, global Gaia between gasps of integration and disintegration, serves as a receptacle for Ukraine, aiming at the present moment to achieve an integrative Hegelian *Aufhebung* into the EU.

In a leap of faith (based on the assertion that European and global history are separated by the word *colonial*), the dichotomy integration/disintegration morphs into colonization/decolonization. However, and here comes Snyder's claim to a theoretical contribution, decolonization does not begin in twentieth-century Asia, Africa, and Latin America but in Europe, more

specifically, the Balkans. Not only do they pioneer decolonization, goes the argument, but their model of nationalism becomes more significant than the French one.

This argument surreptitiously reproduces the divide between a western and eastern type of nationalism, explained in Snyder's essay as the difference between antiroyal and anti-imperial projects. Republicanism was in fact one of the main characteristics of the Balkan national ideologies (with the exception of the Serbs), and the fact that they all ended up as monarchies under German princes or kings tells us more about the imposition of great power politics on small states, as well as international considerations at large, than about the specificities of a putative "Balkan model." Furthermore, by positing that the Balkan model succeeded as a method of disintegration but failed as a method of reintegration (into what? The then existing Habsburg empire or the rising German Reich? Or a Danubian and Balkan federation, which was mostly espoused by socialists, an anathema in Europe at the time?), Snyder unwittingly raises the negative specter of *Kleinstaaterei*.

Some thirty years ago, in his famous *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson proposed a modular theory of nationalism starting in Latin America. In his important and deservedly acclaimed book, this is the one aspect that is usually left in oblivion or criticized. Snyder proposes essentially a new modular theory of nationalism *ex ovo Balcanico*, so I am compelled to look more closely into it.

If the Balkans pioneered decolonization, then we have to accept ipso facto the Ottoman empire as a colonial empire, and the whole argument hinges on this premise. There is a whole body of literature dealing with issues of understanding and defining the categories of empire and imperialism and of colonial empire and colonialism, as well as the differences between them. The cavalier attitude toward the distinction between imperial and colonial is striking. After all, a very different theoretical framing is at stake in each case. In fact, most careful theorists lament that they are often used interchangeably.[3] What specifically makes an empire a colonial empire? Or, if we take colonization in its literal sense as settling a territory, is any empire (or by that count, any state) colonial at its inception? This is not the place to go over these debates, but the point is that they do exist, and a lot hinges on the particular way of defining the terms.

Most theorists resort to differentiating typologies of empire—maritime versus land or contiguous, premodern versus modern, formal versus informal. There is, however, an overwhelming consensus that modern European overseas empires from the sixteenth century onward, usually defined as "colonial empires," do present a qualitatively new phenomenon, and this has to do with industry, mercantilism, and capitalism: "The essential point is that although European colonialisms involved a variety of techniques and patterns of domi-

3. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, trans. Shelley L. Frisch (Princeton, 2005); Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, 2001); Daniel Butt, "Colonialism and Postcolonialism," in Hugh LaFollette, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 9 vols. (Oxford, 2013), 2:892–98; and Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, 2005).

nation, penetrating deep into some societies and involving a comparatively superficial contact with others, all of them produced the economic imbalance that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry."[4]

Taking a cue from this important distinction between premodern and modern empires, I have argued elsewhere that the Ottoman empire was not a colonial empire in the modern sense.[5] In what follows, I will lay out my argument briefly, but the point I want to stress is that the issues are complex and debatable, and they depend on the chosen framework. I am selecting a specific scale of observation in order to reach a historically specific and informed view, in which time-bound and place-bound specificity counts.

In the case of the Ottoman empire a number of features prevent us from describing it as a modern colonial empire, with a partial exception vis-à-vis the Arab provinces for the last, post-Tanzimat, decades of the empire, when the Balkans had already seceded.[6] First, there was no abyss or institutional, legal distinction between metropole and dependencies. Second, there was no previous stable entity that colonized. The Ottoman empire became an elaborate state machine and an empire in the course of shaping itself as an expanding polity, which was a whole in all its territories. Third, there was no amelioration complex, no civilizing-mission obsession comparable to the French or English colonial projects (again, with the exception of the Arab provinces in the empire's final decades). Fourth, there was no hegemonic cultural residue from the Ottoman empire equivalent to the linguistic and general cultural hegemony of English in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere or of French in Africa and Indochina. These factors also apply as a whole to the Habsburgs.[7] While the imperial and colonial status of the Romanov empire is not disputed, it comes with important qualifications.[8] On the other hand, both

4. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 4. No wonder Ireland's status as a colony is open to debate in a lively historiography, but those who accept that definition limit it to the nineteenth century. See Terrence McDonough, ed., *Was Ireland a Colony? Economics, Politics and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005); and Kevin Kenny, ed., *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2004).

5. Maria Todorova, "Balkanism and Postcolonialism, or On the Beauty of the Airplane View," in Costica Bradatan and Serguei Alex. Oushakine, eds., *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Lanham, 2010), 175–95.

6. Selim Deringil, "'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 2 (April 2003): 311–42.

7. The one exception, although also a matter of debate, is Bosnia-Herzegovina. See the convincing case made by Bojan Aleksov, "Habsburg's 'Colonial Experiment' in Bosnia and Hercegovina Revisited," in Ulf Brunnbauer, Andreas Helmedach, and Stefan Troebst, eds., *Schnittstellen: Festschrift für Holn Sundhaussen* (Munich, 2007), 201–16.

8. See, in particular, Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860–1914* (New Haven, 1987), who introduces the concept of "borrowed imperialism"; Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini, eds., *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917* (Bloomington, 1997); Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb, 1996); Jürgen Osterhammel, "Russland und der Vergleich zwischen Imperien: Einige Anknüpfungspunkte," *Comparativ* 18, no. 2 (2008): 11–26; and Alexey Miller, "The Value and the Limits of a Comparative Approach to the History of Contiguous Empires on the European Periphery," in Kimitaka Matsuzato, ed., *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire* (Sapporo, 2007), 19–32.

the imperialism and the colonialism of the posited Soviet empire continue to be debated.[9]

Yet it is not only an argument following from how we define colonial empires but also one about self-perceptions. Subjectivity matters, after all. None of the contemporaries in the Balkans under Ottoman rule felt they were in a colonial positionality. The only ones that insisted on their semicolonial status were the modernizing elites of the empire itself, as voiced by some of its intellectuals at the time as well as during the period of republican Turkey. Therefore, until recently, postcolonial studies has not really made a methodological inroad in the Balkans or in eastern Europe as a whole, in contrast to Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, immensely popular in Greece and Turkey and widely studied in some east European countries even before 1989.

Thus, from my perspective, with neither a colony nor a colonizer in the nineteenth-century Balkans, the employment of the concept *decolonization* is gratuitous. The point here is not for me to impose my interpretation of history as "true." Rather, my insistence is on a minimum level of professional rigor that is necessary for scholarship to thrive and progress. There are consequences to a careless attitude to concepts. Imprecision and lack of meticulousness make the concepts unworkable; this leads to misidentifications, misconceptions, and errors. It means essentially a breach of the conventions of the historical profession which precludes the critical engagement with other scholars' work and the serious debates that can lead to the advancement of scholarship. Admittedly, this definitional rigidity can be broken in order to open up space for innovation, for new theoretical or conceptual moves. We have numerous examples in this respect, with the rethinking of the notions of class, gender, race, the social, the everyday, and so on, which have launched new perspectives and lines of inquiry and have ultimately advanced knowledge.

Breaking up definitional rigidity can also be motivated by considerations outside the strict advancement of scholarship, but that can come with a cognitive or ethical price. Thus, some scholars, in particular cultural critics, have broadened the definitions of the colonial and postcolonial for specific purposes, most often so that they hinge on a larger universal theory.[10] Granted, one can use decolonization as a metaphor and a synonym for the struggle against subjugation and exploitation, but this leads us into a methodologi-

9. For the Soviet Union, Adeeb Khalid has made a comparable argument forcefully and convincingly in his "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 231–51. See also Alexandre Bennigsen, "Colonization and Decolonization in the Soviet Union," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, no. 1 (1969): 141–51; Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of the Nations*, trans. Franklin Philip (London, 1993); Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1994); and Robert Strayer, "Decolonization, Democratization and Communist Reform: The Soviet Collapse in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 375–406.

10. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "In Memoriam: Edward W. Said," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, nos. 1–2 (2003): 6–7; Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić, eds., *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); and Gregory Jusdanis, review of *Imagining the Balkans*, by Maria Todorova, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16, no. 2 (1998): 375–77.

cal conundrum in which any form of subjugation and power hegemony can be termed *colonial*. Why specifically decolonization is used over a quantity of other analogues has mostly to do with its metaphorical and emancipatory power, evoking the saintly specters of Mohandas Gandhi and Frantz Fanon.

The emancipatory mantle of decolonization all too often serves as a cover for the perpetual lament of self-victimization. In his article "Scottish Nationalism and the Colonial Vision of Scotland," Liam Connell examines the use of postcolonial theory in relation to Scotland and finds strong similarities between the explanations offered by early twentieth-century nationalists and modern literary criticism, which reproduces essentialist models of nationality.[11] One can hear the same congruent overtones between nationalism and postcolonialism when it comes to bemoaning eastern Europe's colonial status vis-à-vis the Ottomans or the Soviets. Ironically, the same argument about coloniality has been revived today in some quarters of eastern Europe regarding the EU. In highlighting their new common experience of marginality, some east European intellectuals call for opening up categories that were hitherto used almost exclusively to conceptualize the non-European experience. In this vision, a postcolonial framework serves largely emancipatory goals; it empowers east European intellectuals by propelling them into a paradigm that now pretends to be operating in a universal language.

As long as there is an explicit awareness and recognition of this pretense to universality, the use of postcolonial studies' models can be a legitimate move. As scholars, we are (or should be) aware of the instrumentalization and politicization of concepts. This awareness is what I find regrettably absent in Snyder's essay. And the absence of this awareness does not only involve the notion of decolonization, which I have analyzed at some length. There is also the cavalier attitude to the category *revolution*. Which criteria serve to distinguish a "true" revolution from its opposite? There are overgeneralized pronouncements like France being less developed than Bohemia in the 1930s, flying in the face of conventions about comparative history. Why is the most industrial region, first of an empire and later of a nation-state, compared to a whole nation-state, France? Why not comparable regions like Île-de-France or Pays de la Loire? How is "development" conceptualized and measured? The assertion that the heart of the German-Soviet war, which stood at the center of World War II, was about control over Ukraine might also raise some eyebrows. So would the claim about "a long moment in European and Atlantic history in which a certain order was thought to be durable and sovereignty taken for granted." A long moment since when? 1992? 1999? What exactly is "postmodern" about Russia's public relations campaign? Are we being offered a new understanding of postmodernity? What is a "normal setting" for historical concepts? Who decides normality? There is also inconsistency in the use of labels. Why was Scotland's referendum a "separatist" one and not a "decolonization"? And why are states that assert their economic interests necessarily Russian "client states"? It is disappointing that a historian who has done a lot to deconstruct nationalism in his previous work should present a monolithic,

11. Liam Connell, "Scottish Nationalism and the Colonial Vision of Scotland," *Interventions* 6, no. 2 (June 2004): 252–63.

almost anthropomorphic Ukraine, without any internal diversity, in his discourse. Finally, maintaining that Russia found "limited social support and few committed allies beyond criminals and local right-wingers and Nazis" in Luhans'k and Donets'k mirrors the Kremlin's propaganda. We have come full circle to what Snyder himself warns against: "the alternative reality of propaganda, whose tropes can otherwise serve as a tempting substitute for thought."

I am not skirting the issue of Ukraine. Suffice it to say that my own biases are very different from Snyder's, but this does not make them identical to the Kremlin's. It is, however, unacceptable to reduce complicated issues to a Manichean parable and to neglect arguments extended by the likes of Robert Skidelsky, John Mearsheimer, Henry Kissinger, Mary Dejevski, and Stephen Cohen, though—or precisely because—they are in the minority. This does a disservice to the academic readership, to the role of the public intellectual, and, ultimately, to the cause of Ukraine.