

Displacing East and West

Towards a postcolonial reading of 'Ostforschung' and 'Myśl Zachodnia'

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“In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe we were Tatars, while in Asia we are Europeans too”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky¹

“Maurice: (...) Nein, nicht in Finnland. Darunter, in jedem Sinn darunter. (...) Es genügt, daß ich aus einem Land komme, das im Westen vom Osten und im Osten vom Westen liegt”

Sławomir Mrożek²

Does the excerpt from Dostoyevsky's diary indicate the Eurasian peculiarities of the Russian history, tracing back to the Mongol yoke? Does it mean that Russians were originally Europeans/masters and degenerated later into Asians/slaves under the Mongol occupation? Who are Russians in Dostoyevsky's perception: Asians or Europeans? What did Maurice, a character in Mrożek's play *Kontrakt* (1986), mean by saying 'ich aus einem Land komme, das im Westen vom Osten und im Osten vom Westen liegt'? Is 'West vom Osten' West? And is 'Ost vom Westen' East? Which part does Maurice's hometown 'Bereźnica Wyżna', a small Polish country town on the Poland-Ukraine border, belong to: East or West? Is it Europe in Asia or Asia in Europe?

Both Dostoyevsky and Mrożek questioned any pompous scientificity of the geo-positivistic conception of East/Asia and West/Europe by using the metaphorical power of the literary intuition. These literary fragments are eye-opening in a postcolonial understanding of 'Ostforschung' and 'myśl zachodnia'. If Dostoyevsky shook the

common sense of the Tartars/Europeans identity dichotomy among Russians, Mrozek stirred up the popular belief in the geo-positivistic boundary of East/Asia and West/Europe. For them, East and West, Asia and Europe are not fixed geographic entities but political constructs in flux. Indeed both East and West are relational concepts carrying meaning only when they are co-figured in the discourse of history, culture, civilization, religion, etc. However, the relationship between East and West is not equal because the civilizational hierarchy is determined by its supposed position in the homogenous and unified time of History. Thus, Mrozek's 'West from East' equals 'forward from backward', while 'East from West' means 'backward from forward' in schematic historicism.

Seen from postcolonial perspectives, the German 'Ostforschung' created the Slavic East just as Anglo-French Orientalism created the Orient, the Oriental and his world.³ It is the knowledge of Orient/East that creates Orient/East, not vice versa. As a response Polish 'myśl zachodnia' tried to find symmetrical equivalents to European history and stressed the Polish Slavic march towards the West against the German 'Drang nach Osten'. Polish Western studies went even further in insinuating that the gap between Poland and the putative West is narrower than the gap between Germany and its West. What should be questioned is not which gap is narrower. Postcolonial perspectives help us to interrogate the underlying epistemology of the question of Eurocentrism.⁴ Methodologically a postcolonial reading of 'Ostforschung' and 'myśl zachodnia' accords with new historical research on 'Beziehungsgeschichte', 'histoire croisée', 'overlapping history', 'border history' and 'transnational history' in problematizing and deconstructing the hierarchy-ridden co-figuration of East and West.

Once put in the global chain of national histories, the discursive relationship between 'Ostforschung' and 'myśl zachodnia' becomes multilateral rather than bilateral because Germany's West and Poland's East should be accounted for.⁵

Germany was the object of the French Orientalism, while 'Ostforschung' signified Germany's Orientalism towards its Slavic neighbors. It is intriguing to remember that Konrad Adenauer, a postwar German chancellor from the western Rheinland, muttered 'Asia' every time his train crossed the Elbe into Prussia.⁶ Arguably interwar Germany occupied the position of 'East in the West' vis-à-vis France and even the Rheinland.⁷ As Norbert Elias's contrast of French 'civilization' and German 'culture' shows succinctly, spiritual Germany had to refer to material France very often as its own putative 'West'.⁸ When Ralf Dahrendorf summed up the German *Sonderweg* discourse into a question of 'why wasn't Germany England',⁹ he revealed the strategic location of Germany in the imaginary geography, namely 'East from West' in Mrozek's terms. Thus Orientalism and Occidentalism coexisted in German historical discourse.

In the East Asian context, one can point out that the German word 'Ostasien' had a politically neutral connotation free from the Orientalist bias of the Anglo/French word 'Orient'. It should be noted that the Japanese imperial dream of making 'the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' used the word of 'toa' (東亞) based on the German 'Ostasien' instead of 'toyo' (東洋) based on the English word Orient.¹⁰ It may seem to confirm the *idée fixe* that Orientalism did not blossom in Germany because

Germans could not build up a colonial empire. It may be partly true at least in East Asia. But it does not mean that German historical discourses have been free from Orientalist bias. Postcolonial perspectives enable us to see the dialectical interplay of Orientalism and Occidentalism on a global scale. The German usage of 'Ost' indicates the peculiar ambivalence of German Orientalism. Germany occupied the position of East vis-à-vis France as its own putative 'West', while it posited itself as 'West' in relation to its Slavic neighbors. But Anglo/French Orientalism was not that ambivalent. England and France did not need the putative 'West' because they constituted the 'West' by themselves.

If one pushes Norbert Elias's division of German culture and French civilization to its logical conclusion, culture was the ideological weapon with which Germany would stand against the superior French civilization. While civilization was the ideology of the French nation state, culture was the ideology of the German nation-state. The debate over the nationality of the Alsatians between Heinrich von Treitschke and Fustel de Coulanges is a representative example. This dichotomy of East/culture/Kulturnation and West/civilization/Staatsnation has been recurrent in the global chain of history: Russian Slavophiles' assertion that 'inner truth' based on religion, culture and moral convictions in Russia is much more important than 'external truth' expressed by the law and the state in the West; Indian nationalist discourse of the superiority of the spiritual domain in East over the material domain in West; Japanese fascism under the guise of what might be called '*Gemeinschaft* capitalism' against Western '*Gesellschaft* capitalism'.¹¹

What matters, however, is not any national peculiarity but the strategic position of each historical unit in the imaginary geography. In contrast to its self-portrayal as the 'East' vis-à-vis France, Germany's national self posed as the 'West' in relation to its Slavic neighbors. *Studia Zahodnie* in Poland has meant German Studies while *Ostforschung* in Germany meant Polish studies. The imagining of East/West in virtual reality does not stop at the German-Polish border. Posited as the 'East' by Germans, Poles regarded themselves as 'Europeans' against the 'Asiatic' Russians. In turn, Russians, underprivileged as 'Tartars' in Europe, could represent themselves as Europeans confronting Asian neighbors as indicated in the Dostoyevsky's diary. With its victories in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, however, Japan proved its equality with the West and Russia's affinity with the East. The global chain of East/West confrontations in a constant position change knows no end.

The intellectual interplay of German Orientalism and Polish Occidentalism form a part of this global chain of East/West in nationalist discourse. It is no wonder that we find analogies between the colonization of the 'Wild West' in America and the medieval eastern colonization in East Prussia. As shown in a saying, "California is to the U.S.A. what Bohemia was to Germany in the medieval period," this analogy had developed into a thesis of the civilizing mission in Eastern Europe. Johann Gustav Droysen was second to none when he insisted that the interethnic mixing of Slavic and German blood was as rare as its counterpart of American native 'redskins' and white settlers. In the same way as Droysen, Heinrich von Treitschke also pioneered the German Orientalism with reference to the rights of the Kulturvölker over barbarians in

his well-known essay on the Teutonic Knights. These God fathers of German national history regarded the medieval eastern colonization as medieval Germany's great historical achievement. For them, the Eastern territory of German colonization was a no-man's land, or 'a European Third World' in today's term.¹²

It was not in Eastern Europe but in German South-West Africa (today's Namibia) that German Orientalism was materialized in its full form. It is noteworthy that Lebensraum and Konzentrationslager were not invented by the Hitler regime but by Wilhelmian colonizers. Indeed, the colonial legal system in Namibia included a law banning Rassenmischung (1905) and provided conceptual and linguistic tools for later Nazi lawmakers. The German South-West African economic model was the precursor of Himmler's Generalplanost. However, it would be a hasty conclusion to draw a linear continuity between German colonialism in South-West Africa and the Holocaust.¹³ The Holocaust should not be reduced to another peculiarity of German colonialism. Rather, the Holocaust should be seen in the context of the continuity of 'Western' colonialism, as Hannah Arendt suggested when she articulated the concept of 'administered mass killing' (*Verwaltungsmassenmord*) in respect to the British colonial experience.¹⁴

In other words, the German colonialists' genocide as the breaking of a taboo in the Herero and Nama wars in 1904-07 can be better explained from the transnational perspectives of Euro-colonialism than by recourse to German peculiarities deriving from the circumstances of a latecomer's colonialism. The Nazi utopia of a racially purified German empire was mimicry of Western colonialism by 'turning imperialism on its head and treating Europeans as Africans'.¹⁵ Nazi Germans were convinced of their 'white man's burden' inside Europe as they regarded Slavic people as 'white negroes' and Slavic lands as 'Asia'. They thought Poland should be treated like a colony. Frequently they referred to Ukrainians as 'white Negroes' and spoke of waging colonial war in the Ukraine 'as among Negroes'. And the war against Russia was justified as 'the defense of European culture against Muscovite-Asiatic inundation'. Indeed, 'Western' colonialism provided an important historical precedent for Nazi Eastern policies. A certain historical connection between colonial genocide and Nazi crimes is undeniable.

Hitler did not stick to a reified geography. He stated explicitly that 'the border between Europe and Asia is not the Urals but the place where the settlements of Germanic type of people stop and pure Slavdom begins'. And 'the Slavs would provide the German equivalent of the conquered native populations of India and Africa in the British empire'.¹⁶ It shows vividly how Hitler deployed the typical Orientalist discourses in Eastern Europe. Asia exists not as a natural geography but as an imagined geo-political body. German Orientalism was shared not only by the Nazi coteries but also by ordinary men. Among Germans in the occupied 'East', it was not difficult to find a sense of cultural superiority similar to that associated with a colonial mission. German soldiers who marched into Eastern Europe mentioned very often 'the primitiveness, barrenness and backwardness' in the region. A German soldier, stationed in Poland, wrote in his war diary in 1939 that 'the soul of an Eastern man is mysterious'.¹⁷

Polish Occidentalism, represented by 'myśl zachodnia', was invented to refute German Orientalism. Poles and Czechs' preference for the term 'Central Europe' over 'Eastern Europe' is a good indication of their reluctance to be categorized as 'East'.

Polish Occidentalism disregarded 'Europe Orientale' on the ground that this pure geographic categorization of 'Eastern Europe' does not carry any historical, civilizational, economic or cultural meaning. The notion of 'Europa Słowiańska' has also been suspected because there exists no racial and cultural unity of Slavic peoples.¹⁸ The term 'Central Europe' is preferable because of its stress on the connections to the Western civilization. But Polish intellectuals could not use the term 'Central Europe' without reservation because 'Mittel Europa' implies historically the German hegemony in this region. It posed a serious dilemma to Polish Occidentalism.

The term 'Central Europe' is preferable for its inclination towards Western civilization, but inappropriate for its historical connotation of German hegemony in the region. Confronting this dilemma of being preferable and inappropriate, Jerzy Kłoczowski proposed the concept of 'Środkowo-Wschodna Europa' as a solution.¹⁹ It is thought to keep the positionality of the 'central', but simultaneously immune to German hegemony by combining the central with the Eastern. This artificial shift of positionality from the Eastern to the Central-Eastern reflects a desperate desire to escape from the image of the Orient invented by the German Ostforschung. The symbolic change from Yalta to Malta upon the break-up of the Cold War world system made this shift possible. By joining the EU, these countries of 'Central-Eastern Europe' could bid farewell to their past as parts of the German Orientalism's invented Orient.

But Kłoczowski's conception of 'Central-Eastern Europe' does not mean a profound negation of the West-East hierarchy immanent in German Orientalism. It conceals the accommodation of colonial Orientalism in the sub-consciousness level in that 'we' should have been the West. That is, it simply reversed the order with the basic logic of Orientalism intact. Some Polish post-communist lyceum history textbooks reveal that hidden desire. For example "Człowiek i Historia" (2004) emphasizes that Poland has been a part of the West and thus what happened within the orbit of Western civilization is most important for Poles.²⁰ The other history textbook, written by Roszkowski - a representative historian of the 'second circulation' under the communist regime in the 1980's--, defined the nineteenth century as the history of the expansion of European civilization into the 'Rest'. He does not hesitate to write explicitly that Euro-centrism is inevitable and justifiable to a certain extent.²¹ His narrative is typical of Eurocentric diffusionism with the 'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure.

What is more interesting in these history textbooks is the division of Poland and Russia into Europe and the Rest. The idea of the division of Poland and Russia stands in the continuity of the Polish intellectual tradition of justifying Poland's Western aspirations by Orientalizing Russia and its Eastern neighbors. It is reminiscent of the Japanese intellectuals' strategy of inventing their own Orient to escape from the European invention of the Orient.²² Not to mention Polish nationalists, even the Polish socialists were not free from red Orientalism.

As shown in the famous slogan 'from sea to sea', the PPS anticipated the state boundaries of the future independent Poland as coinciding with the territory of the historic 'Polish Republic'. In fact the main argument of PPS theoreticians was that non-historic and backward nationalities on the borderlands such as Lithuanians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians should develop civilization under the guidance of Poland.

Red Orientalism was not peculiar only to the social patriotic wing of Polish socialism. Even Rosa Luxemburg, a most uncompromising proletarian internationalist in favor of collaboration with the Russian social democrats, was not hesitant to label Leninism as 'Tartar Marxism'.²³ Aleksander Wat, a brilliant Marxist literary critic before World War II, remembered Soviet Russia as 'Asia at its most Asian'. He described frequently how he suffered from those Mongol-like Asiatic faces with sweaty feet in the Soviet Union.²⁴ Viewed from this century-long Polish Orientalism, which existed beyond ideological division, it is not surprising to find straightforward Eurocentrism in post-communist history textbooks as well as in the historical discourse in civil society. Postcolonial perspectives keep a critical gaze not only on German Orientalism in 'Ostforschung' as a *fait accompli* but also Polish Orientalism in 'myśl zachodnia' as a latent stigma.

Notes

¹F. Dostoyevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, Kenneth Lantz, trans. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 1374.

²Peter Oliver Loew ed., *Polen denkt Europa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 11.

³Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 40.

⁴See Jie-Hyun Lim, "Colonial Modernity or Sonderweg? A postcolonial reading of Marxist historicism" *Proceedings of the Postcolonial Reading of Sonderweg Conference* December 2-4, 2010, RICH at Hanyang University.

⁵For an analogy of historical studies between Germany-Poland and Japan-Korea, see Jie-Hyun Lim, "The Configuration of Orient and Occident in the Global Chain of National Histories," in Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas and Andrew Mycock eds., *Narrating the Nation* (New York: Berghan Books, 2008), 290-308.

⁶Ian Buruma and Avishi Margalit, *Occidentalism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 52.

⁷For 'East' and 'West' as an imaginative geography and the schema of co-figuration of East and West, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 49-72; Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 40-71.

⁸See Nagao Nishikawa, *Zouho Kokkyou no Koekata* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2001), Ch. 6.

⁹David Blackburn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 7, 164.

¹⁰Reinhard Zöllner, "Die Konstruktion 'Ostasiens': die deutsche und japanische Rolle bei der Entdeckung eines imaginierten Raumes," Sebastian Lentz/Ferjan Ormaling eds., *Die Verräumlichung des*

Welt-Bildes (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008).

¹¹Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 93-106; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 3-13; Harry Harootyan, *Overcome by Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), xxx.

¹²Jan M. Piskorski, "After Occidentalism: The Third Europe Writes Its Own History," in Piskorski ed., *Historiographical Approached to Medieval Colonization of East Central Europe* (Boulder, 2002), 14-18.

¹³For the continuities between colonial genocide and the Holocaust see Juergen Zimmerer, "Die Geburt des Ostlandes aus dem Geiste des Kolonialismus: Die nationalsozialistische Eroberungs- und Beherrschungspolitik in (post-)kolonialer Perspektive", *Sozial Geschichte* 19 / 1 (2004); Benjamin Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe?", *European History Quarterly* 35 / 3 (2005); Sven Lindquist, *Exterminate All the Brutes* (New York: The New Press, 1996); Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

¹⁴Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, "Der Holocaust als 'kolonialer Genozid'? Europaeische Kolonialgewalt und nationalsozialistischer Vernichtungskrieg", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 33 (2007), p. 445.

¹⁵Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. xiii.

¹⁶Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-45: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 400, 405.

¹⁷B. Łagowski, 'Ideologia Polska. Zachodnie aspiracje i wschodnie skłonności' in *Polska i Korea: Proces modernizacji w perspektywie historycznej*, eds. Jie-Hyun Lim and Michał Śliwa, Cracow, 1997: 88-97

¹⁸J. Kłoczowski, "Wprowadzenie," in *Historia Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 2000), I: 10-12.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰Jerzy Kochanowski; Przemysław Matusik, *Człowiek i historia: czesc 4. Czasy Nowe i Najnowsze (XIX I XX wiek)* (Warszawa, 2004), 12.

²¹Anna Radziwill, Wojciech Roszkowski, *Historia dla Maturzysty. Wiek XIX* (Warszawa, 2004), p. 7.

²²Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993).

²³Jie-Hyun Lim, "Labour and the National Question in Poland," in Stefan Berger and Angel Smith eds., *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1999).

²⁴Alexander Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 98, 108, 114 and passim.