

Special Issue „Conjunctural Geographies of Post-socialist and Postcolonial Conditions“: Introduction

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Abstract

This special issue is part of the ongoing efforts of scholars, artists and activists to challenge knowledge production hierarchies in and about the post-socialist East. It takes the latter as its point of departure as a site of autonomous theoretical and political practice. The articles in this special issue focus on a range of topics, including infrastructure and mobility, protest and social contention, feminist and queer activism, property rights and human-soil relationships. All papers reveal and contest the erasure, marginalization and reductionism at play in academic, media and public discourses when it comes to the sociopolitical realities and the histories of the post-socialist East, along with the lived and embodied violence that ensue from the domination of Eurocentric models in post-socialist societies. Each paper offers its own ways of moving beyond political and epistemological dead ends, offering alternative interpretations, methods, ways of theorizing, and academic, activist, and artistic practices, in an effort to contribute towards decolonizing knowledge production and political practice in the region. These contributions offer different strategies through which to navigate and push against our marginalization in knowledge production by engaging with post- and decolonial thinking, unearthing forgotten or marginalized histories, or creating new spaces for knowledge production for post-socialist lives beyond conventional Western paradigms.

Keywords: conjunctural theorizing, decolonial theory, post-socialist East

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Introduction: Conjunctural Geographies of Post-socialist and Post-colonial Conditions

The exclusion of the post-socialist East from the geographies of academic knowledge production has been a long-standing concern for scholarship of/on the former socialist world. This concern articulates itself in a few distinct if interrelated guises. For starters and as they address this disparity of theoretical interest, some scholars have emphasized the dual exclusion of the post-socialist East from comparative research agendas both in the Global North and South.¹ Others have highlighted the minor role that the knowledge produced in the post-socialist East plays in wider conceptual and theoretical debates.² While the North is seen here as generative of theoretical knowledge that can travel to the „the rest,” East or South, the latter usually retain the function of being an additional case of or an empirical testing ground for Western theories.³ Still others have demonstrated how the assumption about the relative closeness and similarity of Eastern to Western Europe and its consequent measuring of the former against the latter (for example in the form of comparing socialist and post-socialist cities to capitalist ones⁴) often reproduces racializing stereotypes about the re-

¹Martin Müller, In Search of the Global East. Thinking between North and South, SSRN Scholarly Paper. Social Science Research Network, Rochester, NY, April 4, 2018, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2881296>(accessed June 23, 2022).

²Slavomíra Ferenčuhová/ Michael Gentile, Introduction. Post-Socialist Cities and Urban Theory, in: Eurasian Geography and Economics 57 (2016), pp. 483–496, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1270615>; Tauri Tuvikene, Strategies for Comparative Urbanism: Post-Socialism as a De-territorialized Concept, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 40 (2016), pp. 132–146, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12333>.

³JuditTimár, More than ‘Anglo-American’, It Is ‘Western’. Hegemony in Geography from a Hungarian Perspective, Themed section on „The Spaces of Critical Geography”, in: Geoforum 35 (2004), pp. 533–538, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.01.010>; Alison Stenning/ Kathrin Hörschelmann, History, Geography and Difference in the Post-socialist World: Or, Do We Still Need Post-Socialism?, in: Antipode 40 (2008), p. 315, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2008.00593.x>; Robert Kulpa/ Joanna Mizielińska(eds.), De-centring Western Sexualities. Central and Eastern European Perspectives, Ashgate Publishing, London 2016.

⁴Sonia Hirt et al., Conceptual Forum. The ‘Post-Socialist’ City, in: Eurasian

gion's alleged institutional or cultural „deficiencies“⁵ and its „relative backwardness“ vis-à-vis the West⁶. As Mohira Suyarkulova, a feminist scholar from Central Asia, points out in a comment that applies to not only her place of origin: „all too often scholarship [on the region] serves outside audiences, with most of the findings published in a foreign language in obscure academic journals hidden behind a paywall, thus making them virtually inaccessible to the region's citizens.“⁷

These long-standing concerns were re-articulated recently with the unfolding of Russia's brutal war on Ukraine in late February 2022. A number of activists and scholars of/from the post-socialist East vocally resisted the reductionist focus on Russia's aggression. They objected both to „US-“ and „West-splaining“, and to Russocentric explanations, due to their common dismissal of historically grounded cleavages across the post-socialist East as structurally irrelevant. In addition to debating the analysis of what led to the war, the agency of Ukrainian and other Eastern European societies, and the significance of acknowledging Russian imperialism within a frame of inter-imperiality, Eastern scholars and activists contested the ongoing marginalization of knowledge coming from the East. The Ukrainian scholar Vladimir Artiukh argued in his letter to Western, mostly leftist colleagues that „the world is not exhaustively described as shaped by or reacting upon the actions of the US. It has gained dynamics of its own, and the US and Europe is in reactive mode in many areas. You explain the distant causes instead of noticing the emergent trends.“⁸ Instead of claiming

Geography and Economics 57 (2016), pp. 497–520, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1271345>; Karin Wiest, Comparative Debates in Post-Socialist Urban Studies, in: Urban Geography 33 (2012), pp. 829–849, <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.33.6.829>.

⁵Tatjana Thelen, Shortage, Fuzzy Property and Other Dead Ends in the Anthropological Analysis of (Post)Socialism, in: Critique of Anthropology 31 (2011), pp. 43–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X10393436>.

⁶Stenning/Hörschelmann, History, Geography and Difference.

⁷MohiraSuyarkulova, 'Renegade Research'. Hierarchies of Knowledge Production in Central Asia, in: openDemocracy, December 10, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/renegade-research/> (accessed June 23, 2022).

⁸Volodymyr Artiukh, US-Plaining Is Not Enough. To the Western Left, on Your and

to offer a complete or superior analysis, he took seriously the new uncertainties and insisted that the knowledge from the East cannot be dismissed while trying to make sense of the war: „Overwhelmed with the fog of war and psychological stress, I cannot offer a better perspective. I would only call for help in grasping the situation in theoretical terms while incorporating insights from our corner of the world.“⁹

While this „Conjunctural Geographies of Postsocialist and Post-colonial Condition“ cluster was conceived long before the outbreak of Russia's war on Ukraine, it started out with a similar intuition about the hierarchies of knowledge production. As a modest expression of solidarity with Artiukh's pressing concern – and fully cognizant of the abyss separating theory and survival – we also insist on taking seriously the post-socialist East as a *site of autonomous theoretical and political practice*.¹⁰ Notably, our emphasis on autonomy here presupposes, rather than precludes, conceptual and methodological interdependence and cross-pollination, understood as a germinative and transformative theoretical practice from location. Such an approach seeks firstly to overcome the tendency to make the post-socialist experience fit under the dominant North Atlantic universals, and on the other hand, to consider that experience as incommensurable with and incomparable to historical experiences from elsewhere. Secondly, it also entails supporting those who work within and about the East by centering local accounts, epistemological and conceptual tools that are useful for making sense of the political and social realities of the post-socialist East. The texts included below join emerging post-socialist decolonial thinkers in helping construct a vocabulary for articulating the post-socialist experience in critical discourses on the global world

Our Mistakes, in: Lefteast (blog), March 2, 2022, <https://lefteast.org/us-plaining-is-not-enough-to-the-western-left-on-your-and-our-mistakes/> (accessed June 23, 2022).

⁹Artiukh, US-Plaining.

¹⁰We see the post-socialist East as a heterogeneous space, shaped through diverse imperial and colonial experiences, beyond the shared socialist past also connected through continuous omission in global geopolitical imaginaries, and its predominant placement in the cracks between the Global North and South.

order. They also seek to move beyond the „West-against-the-rest“ narratives in which the post-socialist space does not fit neatly under either one.

Instead of offering a singular formula for elaborating new epistemological and conceptual entries, the nine contributions of this special issue offer diverse and at points experimental approaches to illustrate how the East can be taken seriously in a theoretical and political vein, and also offer different strategies through which to navigate and push against our marginalization in knowledge production. In what follows we first overview how the special issue relates to key debates in post " and decolonial literature on the post-socialist East. Second, we summarize four specific contributions of the articles of the special issue, advancing our knowledge on:¹¹ conjunctural theorizing,¹² unearthing forgotten histories,¹³ decolonial concepts, and¹⁴ subversive artistic and political practices.

¹¹Martin Müller, In Search of the Global East. Thinking between North and South, SSRN Scholarly Paper. Social Science Research Network, Rochester, NY, April 4, 2018, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2881296> (accessed June 23, 2022).

¹²Slavomíra Ferenčuhová/ Michael Gentile, Introduction. Post-Socialist Cities and Urban Theory, in: Eurasian Geography and Economics 57 (2016), pp. 483–496, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1270615>; Tauri Tuvikene, Strategies for Comparative Urbanism: Post-Socialism as a De-territorialized Concept, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 40 (2016), pp. 132–146, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12333>.

¹³JuditTimár, More than ‘Anglo-American’, It Is ‘Western’. Hegemony in Geography from a Hungarian Perspective, Themed section on „The Spaces of Critical Geography“, in: Geoforum 35 (2004), pp. 533–538, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.01.010>; Alison Stenning/ Kathrin Hörschmann, History, Geography and Difference in the Post-socialist World: Or, Do We Still Need Post-Socialism?, in: Antipode 40 (2008), p. 315, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2008.00593.x>; Robert Kulp/ Joanna Mizielińska(eds.), De-centring Western Sexualities. Central and Eastern European Perspectives, Ashgate Publishing, London 2016.

¹⁴Sonia Hirt et al., Conceptual Forum. The ‘Post-Socialist’ City, in: Eurasian Geography and Economics 57 (2016), pp. 497–520, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1271345>; Karin Wiest, Comparative Debates in Post-Socialist Urban Studies, in: Urban Geography 33 (2012), pp. 829–849, <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.33.6.829>.

Contributing to post- and decolonial literature on the post-socialist East

East European postcolonial scholars of the 1990s famously mined the representational regimes and social imaginaries of Western Europe, as they sought to construct, between the Enlightenment and the 20th century, the East of the European continent as synonymous with the backward, primitive and inherently violent.¹⁵ More recent work on the post-socialist East has taken up the call to probe the co-constitution of global coloniality and modern (racial) capitalism, both extending the emergence of racial regimes further back in time (to the long 16th century and even earlier) and heeding Stuart Hall’s argument that, quite often, race is the modality in which class is lived.¹⁶ This special issue of *Connections* builds on this recent tendency, drawing inspiration from the specificities of the post-socialist East over the long durée. This specificity notably necessitates not only a simple repurposing of the central intuitions of postcolonial thought coming from the Global South, but also preparing the ground for genuine contributions by Eastern scholars to the broad conversation around race and capitalism of the present moment. Papers in the special issue have taken up issues of political economy and the deep imbrications of capitalism and racism in the post-socialist context over the past three decades, en-

¹⁵Marija Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York 1997; Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994; Milica Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalisms. The Case of Former Yugoslavia*, in: *Slavic Review* 54 (1995), pp. 917–931, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2501399>.

¹⁶Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, *Decolonizing Eastern Europe. Beyond Internal Critique*, in: Bogdan Ghiu (ed.), *Performing History, Idea Arts + Society, Catalogue and Supplement to the Romanian Pavilion of the Venice Biennial 2011*, pp. 1–13; Manuela Boatcă, *Multiple Europes and the Politics of Difference Within, Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, eBook, Duke University, 2013, https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/sites/globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/v3d3_Boatca2.pdf (accessed June 23, 2022); József Böröcz, Introduction. Empire and Coloniality in the „Eastern Enlargement“, in: József Böröcz/ Melinda Kovács (eds.), *Empire’s New Clothes. Unveiling EU Enlargement*, Telford 2001, pp. 4–50; Piro Rexhepi, *The Politics of Postcolonial Erasure in Sarajevo*, in: *Interventions* 20 (2018), pp. 930–945, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2018.1487320>; Stuart Hall et al. (eds.), *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, New York 1978.

riching theoretical discussions of the Orientalizing and colonial forces in the region with a critique of capitalism, privatization, austerity, and racism.

The in-between position of the post-socialist East presents a particular variation on the movement of coloniality. Within more familiar iterations of post- and decolonial theory, an often undifferentiated conception of the West/Global North is posited as the imperializing center, reducing its former colonies and their peoples in the South to a permanently subaltern status. Such homogeneous notions often reduce the East to nonexistence or, at least, relegate it to the rank of a semi-peripheral accomplice to coloniality within the broader confines of the continent.¹⁷ Yet, as Laura Doyle has recently alerted us, a more productive point of departure for understanding (neo)colonial relationships is that of *interimperiality*, as the set of political and historical „conditions created by the violent histories of plural interacting empires and by interacting persons moving between and against empires.“¹⁸ The resulting „inter-imperial loops, or dialectical formations“¹⁹ of what is an inherently *interimperial positionality* implicate Eastern Europe at the intersection of at least three distinct but also inseparable presences: that of the West (including, for some, also the Habsburg Empire until after World War I), the Russian empire (and later the USSR) and the Ottoman empire (with further considerable overtime and cross-regional variations regarding how interimperial dynamics unfolded in specific places). The dynamics of post-socialist societies, cultures and subjectivities unfold through the dialectical interplay of these distinct political, economic, and social formations, complicating single-axis readings of relationships of domination and resistance along the way.

Furthermore, the papers in this cluster are grounded in a positive reassessment of the state-socialist past. A theoretical and not only

political casualty of the end of the Cold War, the stigmatization of state socialism has gone hand in hand with the disappearance of the East, as an emergent post-socialist North-South binary came to replace the former „three-worlds“ paradigm²⁰. Within this optic, it is not rare to see socialist modernity subsumed under the rubric of Western coloniality, as the former socialist regimes are assessed to have been equally complicit in the reproduction of global colonial relationships²¹. Against such erasures, recent scholars have insisted on the more complex – not only complicit but also resisting – role played by the socialist East in the global articulations of racialized power. While socialism never fully disinvested from the trappings of Eurocentrism and civilizational whiteness, its specific logics made room for practices and epistemologies that, at least partially, departed

²⁰Müller, In Search of the Global East.

²¹Walter D. Mignolo/Madina V. Tlostanova, Theorizing from the Borders. Shifting to Geo- and Body-politics of Knowledge, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2016), pp. 205–221, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006063333>.²² Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism. Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War*, Princeton 2020; James Mark / Quinn Slobodian, *Eastern Europe in the Global History of Decolonization*, in: Martin Thomas / Andrew S. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.20>; Kristen Ghodsee, Research Note. The Historiographical Challenges of Exploring Second World–Third World Alliances in the International Women’s Movement, in: *Global Social Policy* 14 (2014), pp. 244–264, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018114527100>; Chiara Bonfiglioli, The First UN World Conference on Women (1975) as a Cold War Encounter: Recovering Anti-imperialist, Non-aligned and Socialist Genealogies, in: *Filozofijai Društvo* 27 (2016), pp. 521–541; Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism. Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985*, Montreal 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxw3pdd>; Rossen Djalalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism. Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds*, Montreal 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10kmfcn>; Zhivka Valiavicharska, *Restless History. Political Imaginaries and Their Discontents in Post-Stalinist Bulgaria*, Montreal 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1m0khm>; Nikolay R. Karkov/Zhivka Valiavicharska, *Rethinking East-European Socialism. Notes Toward an Anti-capitalist Decolonial Methodology*, in: *Interventions* 20 (2018), pp. 785–813, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2018.1515647>; Miglena S. Todorova, *Race and Women of Color in Socialist/Postsocialist Transnational Feminisms in Central and Southeastern Europe*, in: *Meridians* 16 (2018), pp. 114–141, <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.16.1.11>; Monica Popescu, *On the Margins of the Black Atlantic. Angola, the Eastern Bloc, and the Cold War*, in: *Research in African Literatures* 45 (2014), pp. 91–109, <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritlite.45.3.91>.

¹⁷Boatcă, *Multiple Europes*.

¹⁸Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History*, in: *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 16 (2014), pp. 159–196, here p. 160.

¹⁹Doyle, *Inter-imperiality Dialectics*, p. 175.

from the colonial underpinnings of the modern Western world.[18] The intermeshing of the logics of implication and divergence reveals the continuous political relevance of the experience of the socialist East, while the potential of stand-alone departures signals positions in a movement towards decoloniality.

A lot of the articles in this special issue, often deploying different methodologies, speak to these ambivalent interimperial dynamics, the manifold ways of reassessing the socialist past and resisting capitalist reality in highly overdetermined contexts.²³ The studies focus on a range of topics, including infrastructure and mobility, protest and social contention, feminist and queer activism, property rights and human-soil relationships. All of the papers reveal and contest the erasure, marginalization, and reductionism at play in academic and public discourses when it comes to the sociopolitical realities and histories of the post-socialist East, along with the lived and embodied violence that ensues from the domination of Eurocentric models in post-socialist societies. Each paper offers its own ways of moving beyond political and epistemological dead ends, offering alternative interpretations, methods, ways of theorizing, and academic, activist, and artistic practices in an effort to contribute towards decolonizing knowledge production and political practice in the region. All texts in the special issue have a broad interdisciplinary range that engages post- and decolonial theory, urban geography, and feminist and queer studies. They also present a unique geographical diversity, speaking from Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, Bosnia, and Serbia, to Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, in dialogue with postcolonial contexts, such as Brazil and Chile. In this way, the special issue connects post-socialist and postcolonial contexts that do not readily speak to each other. The contributors identify mainly as scholars from/of the post-socialist East and some, as scholars of Latin America. While many of us are diasporic in various ways, we have a personal history and commitment to the spaces we write about. The papers bring the East into focus as a

²³Contexts shaped by a complex set of factors and experiences.

complex, bring the East into focus as a complex, heterogeneous, and at times contradictory region and, with that, they challenge the erasure of the region even further.

The articles also contribute to post-socialist and post/decolonial literature and existing debates across and beyond disciplinary, thematic, spatial and conceptual boundaries, by making four specific contributions. Firstly, the contributions in the special issue propose conjunctural theorizing of post-socialist and postcolonial conditions as a (decolonizing) method, either through comparisons across *contexts* marked as post-socialist or postcolonial or by revealing an overlapping and simultaneous operation of post-socialist and postcolonial *conditions* in specific geographies. Secondly, the articles reveal how making visible previously forgotten and marginalized pre-socialist and socialist histories can also shed a different light on the unfolding of current modernization project and/or imperialist agendas. Thirdly, a number of contributions elaborate new epistemological and conceptual entry points for studying so far under-researched themes in decolonial literature across and beyond the region. Finally, the contributions identify subversive activist and artistic practices that destabilize hegemonic, hierarchical frameworks of political analysis in the post-socialist East.

Conjunctural theorizing as a method

The first set of articles contribute towards decolonizing knowledge production on the post-socialist East through conjunctural thinking between post-socialist and postcolonial contexts and conditions. Mutual engagement between theories and contexts of post-socialism and postcolonialism were encouraged as early as the 1990s²⁴ and a range of possible venues for such engagement were laid out in the 2000s²⁵. Despite these contributions, three decades into post-socialism, schol-

²⁴Michael Burawoy / Katherine Verdery (eds.), *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Lanham 1999.

²⁵Sharad Chari / Katherine Verdery, *Thinking between the Posts. Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 (2009), pp. 6–34.

ars have been concerned that „the postcolonial and the postsocialist discourses in their predominant descriptive forms refuse to notice each other’s histories“²⁶, or have warned against „uncritical importation of dehistoricised postcolonial frameworks into a very different context.“²⁷ Yet, engagement with postcolonial literature and, more broadly, between Eastern and Southern contexts has become one of the key sites of resistance against the continuous benchmarking of the East versus the West, and important for elaborating decolonial readings of the post-socialist experience.²⁸ Articles in this special issue build on existing dialogues and offer a number of noteworthy ways in which post-socialist and postcolonial conjunctural thinking can support critical theorizing.

Kemmer, Sgibnev, Weicker, and Woods, as well as **Stipic**, draw on two parallel case studies from (post-)“socialist and postcolonial contexts to contribute to decolonial theorizing in their respective research fields. They avoid direct comparisons according to the logic of similarity of difference, but instead they use „conjunctural theorizing“ as a method. Both contributions appreciate and pay attention to the specificities of each context by mobilizing two parallel cases from Latin America and East Europe to examine how global peripheries or subaltern communities relate to and contest projects of modernity. Kemmer and colleagues conceptualize conjuncture as „the crossing and union of two fields of circumstances“ and use it as a methodological grounding for their argumentation. They discuss the introduction, implementation, and contestations of tramway technologies in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Kharkiv, Ukraine. Challenging

the uncritical discussions of tramways as vehicles of modernization in transportation research, they make visible colonial asymmetries and the violence that accompanied the development of tramways and infrastructure-based urban renewal projects in (semi-)“peripheral contexts. The authors follow a conjunctural approach across not only cases but also different historical periods. They trace the development of tramway infrastructures in cities in Brazil and Ukraine (formerly the Russian empire) at the turn of 20th century and relate those histories to the revival of interest in light rail infrastructures in the 2010s. Drawing on four partially interconnected cases, they shed light on how tram and rail infrastructures transported ideas of European modernity; how top-down imposed urban renewal projects unleashed or deepened socio-spatial inequalities; and, importantly, how such projects were contested through everyday acts of resistance, alternative and subversive narration, and protest and social mobilization. Kemmer and colleagues develop what they call „decolonial conjunctural thinking“ to channel the imaginary of these dispersed and localized contestations in the face of solid and large-scale urban modernization agendas, and open the discussion towards „a planetary constellation of subaltern transport thinking.“

Stipic’s contribution also engages in conjunctural thinking across Eastern Europe and Latin America and focuses on the educational aspects of coloniality in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Chile. The author shows the specific ways in which the two educational projects reiterate social segregation, with private-public and race/class divisions more central in the Chilean case and ethnicity/class tensions more prominent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, Stipic demonstrates the racialization of ethnicity in the Bosnian context as embedded in the modernist nation-state project of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After establishing grounds for parallel learning from the two cases, Stipic discusses student resistance in the two countries. Student struggles challenge the logic of segregated educational systems and, more broadly, the underlying logic of the ethno-national and racial-

²⁶Madina Tlostanova, *The Postcolonial and the Postsocialist. A Deferred Coalition? Brothers Forever?*, in: *Postcolonial Interventions. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 3 (2018), p. 6.

²⁷Karkov and Valiavicharska, *Rethinking East-European Socialism*, p. 788.

²⁸Karkov and Valiavicharska, *Rethinking East-European Socialism*; Katarina Kušić et al., *Dversia’s Special Issue in English: Decolonial Theory & Practice in Southeast Europe*, in: *D* (2019), <https://dversia.net/4644/dversia-decolonial-theory-practice-southeast-europe/>; Madina Tlostanova, *Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference*, in: *Intersections* 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i2.38>.

neoliberal nation-state constructs in Bosnia and Chile. Emphasizing the decolonizing potential of the two instances of student resistance, Stipic argues that „student performances disarticulate the colonial sum of knowledge precisely because they reveal the shreds and patches overwritten by the process of coloniality and its occidental nation-state form.“ Similar to Kemmer and colleagues, Stipic uses conjunctural theorizing as a method to make the political effects of supposedly unrelated subaltern contestations visible.

Lottolz and **Manolova** offer yet another kind of conjunctural thinking in their contribution on the politics of underdevelopment. They argue that historically produced and persisting social exclusion resulting from denied or uneven access to social infrastructure and services should be understood as a „materialization of the postcolonial-post-socialist conjuncture across Eurasia and globally.“ Lottolz and Manolova focus empirically on peripheralized neighborhoods with ethnic minority concentration in two post-socialist cities – Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and Plovdiv, Bulgaria –and initially show how the racist, ethnophobic and developmentalist narratives are used by municipal and national authorities to justify the systemic under-provisioning of social infrastructures and services for particular locales and populations. In Bishkek, authorities mobilize the narrative of the general peripherality and economic under-development of Kyrgyzstan as an excuse for the selective withholding of infrastructure provisioning for some of the new informal settlements (so-called Novostroikas). In Plovdiv, the authorities utilize racializing discourses of undeservedness against Roma and Turkish/Muslim minorities with the similar purpose of justifying infrastructural exclusion. The authors also discuss the different self-mobilization tactics of minoritized communities in each case. They demonstrate not only the transformative potential but also the limits of institutionalized and more informal, community-based initiatives in the two cities, in the face of systematic infrastructural exclusion. The selective non-provisioning of basic infrastructures is central to a deepening social exclusion and the „ma-

terialization of a wider global trajectory of neoliberal urban austerity and under-development.“ This trajectory, they argue, is shared across post-socialist and postcolonial contexts, as each particular case represents a wider conjuncture that unfolds beyond the post-socialist world.

Unearthing forgotten histories

The contributions by **Smirnova** and **Gambino** bring to life erased histories of sociopolitical life to challenge academic and political constructs of the present and the future. Smirnova provides a historical account of the collective land ownership practices in Russia, revealing how the peasants' collectivist project was instrumentalized by public intellectuals and political elites in support of colonial endeavors of tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Firstly, her contribution critiques simplifications characteristic of (primarily Western) contemporary academic literature, where the history of collective land management in Russia is negated or reduced to the 'tragedy' or the 'fuzziness of property.' Secondly, Smirnova articulates decolonial and liberatory aspects of the history of collectivist land ownership in Russia. Finally, the author also reveals how peasants' practices of commoning were politically mobilized to „denote Russia's otherness from the West and, at the same time, to insert the preeminence of its power practices in the near abroad and amongst its own populations.“ Smirnova's account then allows us to understand continuities in the attempts of the Russian state to co-opt and appropriate communal values and land ownership practices for imperialist ends. This brings to mind anthropological analyses of Western empires of modernity, which emphasize how capitalism has consistently utilized non-capitalist economic practices and incorporated discourses of sharing, mutuality and reciprocity for legitimating itself as a system²⁹, and has drawn resources from non-capitalist economies, including the free labor of

²⁹Stephen Gudeman, Necessity or Contingency. Mutuality and Market, in: Chris M. Hann / Keith Hart (eds.), Market and Society. The Great Transformation Today, Cambridge 2009, pp. 17–37.

women and more broadly from the informal economic exchanges for social reproduction³⁰.

Gambino's contribution details how the futuristic projects of seamless logistical worlds and connectivity infrastructures erase and intentionally manipulate preexisting social, cultural and economic practices, as well as the infrastructural histories of the places they intend to utilize as sites of extraction. Gambino starts off by examining discourses surrounding the Anaklia deep-sea port city project, a gigantic infrastructural project, currently stalled, which was designed to strengthen the embedding of Georgia into the networks of global logistics. She engages with statements by the CEO of the Anaklia City project and the CEO of Anaklia Development Consortium. The former had stated that there was „nothing“ in the place where the project was to be implemented, and the latter positioned himself as a patron of the interests and well-being of the local populations. Gambino uncovers the history and continued relevance of Soviet infrastructure networks and Soviet planned and informal subsistence economy practices in the village of Anaklia. She illustrates how the visions of Anaklia's private developers flatten complex and contradictory local histories and present-day practices of survival and reproduction, and instrumentalize what she calls „restorative nostalgia“ to put forward an imagery of seamless logistical futures. Both Gambino and Smirnova's contributions delve into forgotten or simplified histories. On the one hand, they foreground the contradictory and, at times, dark side of these histories, while, on the other, they illustrate how overwriting or flattening such histories, particularly the social memories of self-subsisting economies or collective land management, becomes central to the imperialist projects of capitalist modernity.

Elaborating decolonial theorizing

³⁰J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Minneapolis 2006.

The next set of articles reveals the so far overlooked topics in existing decolonial literature from and about the post-socialist East, offering empirical and conceptual contributions to decolonial theorizing in the region.³¹ **Kušić's** contribution problematizes the absence of land as a topic in the existing decolonial scholarship on the region and offers the concept of „human-soil relationships“ as a way of approaching land in the post-socialist East. Given the emphasis in decolonial literature of thinking from location and together with marginalized and invisibilized voices, the importance of making land integral to decolonial theorizing in the region can hardly be overstated. Kušić draws on her ongoing empirical research in Serbia and Croatia to argue that complexities related to land in socialist and post-socialist times can neither be captured through the post-socialist transitology literature, with its focus on „spectacular“ ownership transfer and interest in a top-down process of land governance, nor by way of globally prominent meta-concepts, such as „land grabbing.“ Kušić suggests a focus on what she calls „slowpolitics“ and „slow violence“ in response to and with the aim of facilitating a decolonial approach to studying land and offers land-soil relationships as an alternative conceptualization of the problem. The latter allows her to move beyond dominant framings, such as agricultural change, and property and economic transformation, and to understand „different knowledges, memories, and ways of being [...] living on, with, besides soils in multiple dimensions, temporalities and ways.“

Kravtsova's paper explores ideas around decoloniality and dependency among feminist networks in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. She draws on interviews with queer and feminist activists, artists and academics in Bishkek and Almaty, and finds that her interlocutors struggled with two sets of constraints. On the one hand, they had to navigate the „colonial“ attitudes of Russian activists who took little interest in struggles in Central Asia. On the other hand, and more prominently, they struggled with their own positionality and the as-

³¹Kušić et al., *Dversia's Special Issue* in English.

sociation of feminism/queerness/human rights with the West, which posed challenges for decolonizing their own practice and „localizing“ their own feminism. Due to the proliferation of women’s rights and LGBTIQ* organizations set up after 1991, numerous feminists in Bishkek were involved with these NGOs, leading to their entanglement with „Western“ discourses. By contrast, the majority of the Almaty activists were mostly grassroots-organized, while, at the same time, more influenced by Russian feminism. Following decolonial scholar Madina Tlostanova’s work around decoloniality and border thinking, Kravtsova argues that the feminist activists exemplified critical border thinking by bringing together the global and the local, creating new solidarities and infrastructures of resistance: „they move between theories, dependencies and practical needs on the ground.“ The local activists resisted the appropriation of postcolonial theory by the national/ist elites that deepens the control of gendered relationships. At the same time, these activists also resisted the imposed Western narratives of gender equality. In this sense and by being attentive to the local and not dismissive of the „traditional,“ Almaty’s activists developed an intersectional framework through which they expanded ideas around gender and sexuality, as well as coloniality and racism.

Building up subversive activist and artistic practice

The contributions by **Genova** and the **Magic Closet** collective discuss subversive activist and artistic practices, which have grown out of criticism towards the hegemonic frameworks of political analysis in post-socialist societies and carry the potential to destabilize and disrupt normative perspectives. Genova’s contribution offers a reading of an ‘interruption’ from Sofia that mocked the municipal politics of infrastructure governance, and theorizes the potential of humor to serve as a social and political force. The contribution by the Magic Closet, in turn, offers a conceptualization of the ‘Dream Machine,’ an activist and artistic practice elaborated as a specific methodological contribution to queer knowledge production in the region. The text

asserts what the authors refer to (drawing on the work of Edouard Glissant) as the „right to opacity“ of the „magic closet“ against the Western logic of transparency of „coming out of the closet.“

Genova’s contribution starts off with a story of a group of friends staging a „sand dune“ in one of the central districts of Sofia in mockery of the municipal government’s infrastructure renewal politics in the spring of 2019. Starting from this seemingly bizarre performance, Genova theorizes the political potential of humor to bypass preexisting and solidified frames of criticism of public authorities and the tropes of the post-socialist condition (e.g. corruption), and to disrupt a post-socialist (and possibly postcolonial) temporal logic of belatedness. In doing so, Genova starts by drawing parallels between post-socialist, postcolonial and decolonial literature, each in its own terms articulating how „a logic of historical belatedness,“ „historical and cultural backwardness“ or „temporal alterations“ have been at the heart of othering non-Western spaces and societies. She emphasizes how catch-up temporalities cement a racializing matrix that justifies established socio-spatial hierarchies and models of exploitation and extraction. She then moves on to explain how the fictitious „beach party“ that ridicules the absurdity of municipal politics of infrastructure governance can serve to disrupt, albeit momentarily, post-socialist transition and modernization narratives in a parodic manner. She argues that the political power of humor and comedy operates „by interrupting a post-communist and colonial temporal logic of lagging behind, by introducing alternative socio-temporal coordinates and frames of reference, that make the hegemonic ones appear at least as arbitrary and silly as their committed iterations.“

Finally, the contribution by the Magic Closet leaves us with hope and ambition for creative decolonial storytelling through the Dream Machine as a method of queer knowledge production. The Magic Closet is a collective of artists and researchers from both the global North and the post-Soviet space wholook beyond conventional tools of academic research and envision ways of analyzing and supporting

queer lives in the post-Soviet world. They open their article by problematizing international solidarity efforts with post-Soviet communities. On the one hand, these efforts sustain and highlight queer lives in the region but, on the other hand, they also take place within what the authors call the „visibility paradigm,” where visibility also means „progress” and prioritizes coming out. The Magic Closet critiques the visibility paradigm as reinforcing Western hegemonic discourses about queerness and, consequently, ignoring „opaque ways of resisting homophobic oppression.” In an effort to recognize and support post-Soviet queer lives in ways that do not impose Western epistemic violence on queerness, the authors work a practice of refusal³² and draw on Édouard Glissant’s concept of opacity.³³ The authors also introduce a methodology which goes well beyond the theoretical, that of the Dream Machine. The Dream Machine is a „kinetic flicker device” which enables the creation of spaces where everyone can dream and later transform these dreams into artistic forms of expression. The archive that later emerges from the Dream Machine becomes a magic closet of post-Soviet queer lives.

Concluding remarks

This special issue grew out of the *Conjunctural Geographies of Postsocialist and Postcolonial Conditions: Thirty Years after 1989* workshop of 2020, and was conceived as part of a cluster of ongoing discussions, among which are the „Dialoguing between the Posts” conferences in Belgrade and the special English-language issue of the journal dVER-SIA, „Decolonial Theory and Practice in Southeast Europe” (edited by Katarina Kušić, Philipp Lottholz and Polina Manolova). We are part of a growing community of scholars and activists that takes the political histories of the East as a site of autonomous theoretical production and political practice. All the papers in this special issue, even though they are extremely diverse in geographical, disciplinary and

thematic scope, exemplify a recent growth in scholarship from the East that draws on decolonial insights into making sense of post-socialist contexts. Situated in concrete sites, each contribution develops contextual and comparative analyses which highlight the specificity of the historical and social contexts of the socialist and post-socialist experiences, generating autonomous methods and knowledge about the East. The post-socialist and post/decolonial worlds appear in these methods and knowledge as conjunctural and intertwined. They stand against the erasure of the „East” in terms of geographical positionality and historical experience, and offer new pathways for thinking about 20th century and contemporary history, which take into account the contributions and complexities of socialist modernities and their transcontinental reach.

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³²Django Paris, Maisha T. Winn, „Humanizing research. Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities, Los Angeles 2014.

³³Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 2010 [1997].

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