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Comments on Martin Müller's
“In Search of the Global East:
Thinking Between North and South”

The text starts with a supportive opinion on the concept of the Global East, evaluating it as a convincing and useful tool for the development of critical studies on the so-called post-communist or the second world in a wider global perspective. In the remaining comments, several reasons for possible problems with the broader implementation of the proposed concept are discussed. They include both the resistance which it could encounter in Central and Eastern Europe, and broader, structural reasons why introducing it as a frame parallel to the Global South paradigm may be problematic. Among the examples of similar issues with new theoretical projects, the experience of the complex and not always enthusiastic reception of the post-colonial theory in Poland is briefly discussed.

Keywords: post-colonial theory, critical theory, orientalism, post-communism, area-studies, peripheries

I find Martin Müller's proposal to promote the Global East paradigm alongside the already established Global South concept to be an important, highly stimulating intellectual idea, but at the same time politically, or even practically, not a very feasible one. On the one hand, I could probably say that it is a proposal I have long been waiting for, at least for such a coherent and robust statement of support of this highly desirable thread of intellectual activity in modern social sciences. However, on the other hand, I am afraid that this is a proposal that is impossible in practical terms, at least for the foreseeable future. The reasons for its impossibility may be as interesting as the project itself, so let me briefly mention how I see at least some of them.

First, the question of the liminality of the region, so rightly mentioned by Müller, is not only one of its interesting features, but is also a major obstacle in the given context. As many other authors pointed out, it makes the question of belonging to Europe or to the West a key political stake for the actors related to that part of the world. At the same time, of crucial importance in this context are symbolic hierarchies within the region, which are again — as we know pretty well from several authors, many of whom are mentioned in the paper under discussion — related to different degrees of supposed Eastness/Westness¹. Being perceived as even slightly more or less Western and/or European than others, particularly one's close neighbors, is an issue of crucial concern for most actors in many corners of the East, especially those who happen to be located closer to the core of the European West. This often makes the closest neighbors the most ardent enemies and leads to a high degree of fragmentation in the region, which is also characteristic for the Balkans and known after that area as Balkanization. Therefore, lumping together so many countries and nations under one umbrella of the Global East, as proposed by Martin Müller, even if justified by analytical rationalities, will hardly be acceptable for most of their contemporary representatives. Being Eastern, less Western than our significant others in the region also implies being seen as peripheral, which is a taboo notion in the region.

¹ In this context, among authors who were not mentioned in the text under discussion, works by József Böröcz (2006) and Atila Melegh (2006) seem to be of highest relevance.

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usually considered stigmatizing labels, making it quite challenging to write about Poland as a country of the periphery even in purely analytical terms. Also, in the case of social theory and social theorists, what is usually expected by the public of countries like Poland is that they will be recognized as part of Western European theory and circles of European social theorists. The very idea of imagining Poland as part of the Global East, while quite convincing to me personally from an analytical standpoint, is unlikely to be acceptable for most Polish intellectuals and social scientists. The use of such a label would contradict both the liberal narrative on Central Europe as part of modern Western Europe defined through the frame of EU membership, as well as the conservative narrative of Central Europe as part of the West defined through common Christian heritage. Most Poles will also not accept being put in a basket with many of their significant others, above all Russians, and for several other reasons, not only them. One good recent example of this lack of enthusiasm for the common Eastern identity is the current resistance in Poland to a joint memorial project in Berlin devoted to East European victims of Nazi Germany. Most Polish commentators expect a separate monument in the German capital, one which would be dedicated uniquely to Poles (or more precisely Polish citizens). Lumping Polish victims with other Eastern Europeans is widely seen in Poland as a devaluation of what is seen as exceptional Polish suffering, also from the hands of some of the other East European nations' representatives collaborating with Hitler (Haszczyński 2020).

It would seem that several important lessons highlighting potential problems with the proposal under discussion could be learned from debates surrounding the application of post-colonial theory in Poland. First of all, we could note that, overall, post-colonial theory was not very enthusiastically accepted in Poland. If used, it was more often employed to attack opponents rather than to challenge the Western hegemony over the region, in particular on the deep, ontological level of criticism, which lies at the core of this approach. As I have argued in several places, among them in my book (Zarycki 2014), post-colonial theory has been adopted in parallel by selected representatives of conflicting intellectual and political camps in Poland. Among them are the main adversaries in the current political conflict in Poland, who can be labeled as conservatives and (left)liberals. The left-liberals consider uses of post-colonial theory by conservatives as an example of its "misuse" or "hostile takeover" (e.g. Snochowska-Gonzalez 2012). In any case, both camps employ the theory to promote their political interests and attack each other, rather than critically analyze Poland's subaltern status. Conservatives, in par-

Conservatives, in particular, refer to post-colonial theory to justify their agenda, including, among others, re-traditionalization and resistance to "progressive" Western ideologies. Left-liberals see conservatives rather as the key colonial agents, portraying them as trying to subdue the country's minorities in the past and present. I am afraid that once Eastern theory is developed within the Global East paradigm, it will again become an object of similar political "abuses" and "takeovers," that is, internal confrontations among Polish actors, producing at least two, if not more, conflicting variants.

Most nations, but also ethnic groups and some regions in Eastern Europe, are founded on ideologies of their uniqueness and essentialized distinctions. Sonderweg thinking is also prevalent in highly nationalized historiographies, as well as other social sciences, of most of the nations of the region. One could thus say that not everyone in our region wants to be emancipated, particularly to be emancipated together with some of our significant others, as well as to be emancipated with the assistance of the Western scholars, in particular of left-liberal orientation.

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In some respects, the current configuration of Western academia, with the dominant role of “area studies” or, in fact, the former Sovietology, in which responsibilities are clearly defined, with the West being in charge of the production of knowledge concerning the region is easier to tolerate for many. Area studies, with their clear separation from national academic fields of countries of the region, which are treated as fieldworks rather than intellectual partners, avoids at least the unavoidable

hypocrisy which may surround the political roles of Global East studies when they emerge. This is because we have to admit that Eastern theory would still be a Western theory, just like Southern theory is. As is also the case with Southern theory, the project is supposed to facilitate the inclusion of scholars from the region into the Western elite, or at least increase the visibility of Eastern intellectuals among the Western elite. Who gets included and who does not will be defined, as usual, by the elite of Western academic institutions. What may thus change with the advent of Eastern theory may be a blurring of the power relations, in particular the command the West exerts over that knowledge area will be less obvious. However, what new meanings will be ascribed to the region will still be decided in the West, now mostly through a selection of Easterners considered worthy of speaking on the global stage in the name of the region.

One could also speculate on the emancipatory power of critical theory in this context. I tend to have a view on critical theory and political action as rather weakly related at most of the times. Critical theory is, above all, a tool for describing and deconstructing different forms of inequalities. Such descriptions may become meaningful acts of socially conditioned cognition but usually have a minimally direct impact on the “real world”. Of course, they may lead to the politicization of some of the inequalities, and as a result, stimulate action directed towards their alleviation. Nevertheless, on many occasions, such political activity is often taken even without prior problematization of specific inequalities by critical scholars. Any possible political action will be, in my view, conditioned first of all by a favorable configuration of political forces in the region, in particular a possibility of the emergence of broad trans-national coalitions. Second, the emancipation of the region would require the accumulation and consolidation of tangible material resources. Mere intellectual “recognition” by Western scholars will neither significantly change the place and the region’s overall visibility, nor will it make up for the weakness of its academic institutions, rightly mentioned by Müller. Any projects that would not involve their strengthening based on local scholars and intellectuals and that did not mostly rely on local resources should be considered compensatory, in my view, and thus not very effective in the long run. What I would personally dream of, and what will not come with the establishment of Global Eastern studies, would be the possibility of working at and travelling between well-funded, thriving intellectual academic institutions in cities like Kyiv, Moscow, and Warsaw, as well as other intellectual centers of the region. Such institutions would have the status and resources compara-

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ble to at least the lower part of the top 100 universities in Europe and would not be mere subsidiaries of Western universities, such as CEU or the European University, which are considerably alienated from the context of the academic fields of the countries in which they were located. I also dream of a situation in which, in such a network of high-ranking academic institutions in the region, we, academics from Central and Eastern European countries, would be able to discuss ideas of common interest without the usual mediation of our Western colleagues and their institutions. This would also require some political and economic integration of the region, which is currently hardly conceivable. In fact, one of the critical mechanisms reproducing region's weakness and dependency is its constant fragmentation. It results in benefits for the West, similar to the effects of what could be called a strategy of the "rule and divide" type. One could recall here Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe*, in which he reconstructed two primary roles prescribed to the Eastern Europeans by intellectuals of Enlightenment (Wolff 1994). The first was the role which Voltaire suggested to the Russians, in particular Russian leaders, which was one of a strong, authoritarian ruler, seen as the only adequate model for the conducting modernization in the difficult conditions of the East. The other was proposed to the Poles by Rousseau, who supported the Polish anti-Russian rebels and called on them to resist Russification and remain "European at heart". In fact, the West continues to support both of these roles to this today, thereby sustaining continuous conflicts in the region. This can be seen in pragmatic relations maintained with the regime of Vladimir Putin, as well as in the parallel support of Ukrainian or Belarussian democratic movements. However, what I also see as a condition of any tangible emancipation of the region on the global scale is its economic integration, one which would allow decreasing high economic dependence on the West, in particular of the so-called Central Europe, which is currently primarily owned by the West in the most direct sense of the words (e.g. Myant 2018). Let me, at the same time, remind readers that it was Rosa Luxemburg (1898) who argued that the existence of a viable Polish state, that is, one which would be based on a healthy economic system, is impossible without its access to the Russian market. Interestingly, however, she is rarely quoted on this crucial observation today, even if we can see a kind of renaissance of interest in the Luxemburg's thought on the Polish left.

In such contexts, it's also important to reflect on why we, Easterners, appear to be so uninteresting to the Western core, as Martin Müller rightly noted. I would argue that Eastern Europe's dullness should be

seen as structurally conditioned. The role of the region, in particular its more Western part, largely comes down to a reservoir of cheap labor for the Western core, both in the form of migrants as well as those working in assembly plants and call centers in the region. However, that labor force is not expected to comment on its role in the global system or, in particular, on the state of Western societies. Müller also pointed out that in contrast to the Global South, the Global East has no exotic allure; we could also add that it is not a major global tourist destination. One could note that there is some structural similarity of this situation in Eastern Europe, to one in which peripheral regions of the West found themselves. What I have in mind here are its inner peripheries, in particular the poorer, working-class suburbs of the metropolitan areas, which are also primarily cheap and “domesticated” labor force providers. One such specific inner periphery is the so-called “inland empire,” also known as Inlandia, that is, the Eastern peripheries of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Even if located next to Hollywood, the global entertainment industry’s hub, they are almost absent from the American and also a global map of “interesting” places. It is quite telling that in the movie by David Lynch entitled “Inland Empire,” even if it was named after the region, no scenes were actually shot in the Inland Empire. Ironically, a major part of the movie was shot in Łódź, Poland, another far-away, little interesting “Eastern” region with no clear identity for the average member of the global audience. In any case, Eastern Europe’s history teaches us that as long as the region does not threaten the West, either militarily or as its economic or political competitor, it appears as uninteresting to the global public. Once moments of exceptional economic growth or military consolidation take place in the region, it becomes visible for some time, as it was the case at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, when an economic boom in the Russian empire occurred. Interestingly, this was also discussed by Rosa Luxemburg in her aforementioned book, in which she suggested both Poland and Russia should have more global relevance for Western audiences. This period of dynamic economic growth also resulted in the global visibility of Russian art and literature from that period. Later, a comparable moment could be observed in the late 1950s and 1960s, particularly until 1968, when the communist block attracted considerable attention and interest, often turning into a fascination with what has been considered an alternative modernization path. Later on, however, the entire region was increasingly orientalized. In the same way, the West’s internal peripheries remain little known and are considered uninteresting, as long as they remain impoverished and, at the same time, relatively stable politically.

Despite these conditions, which make the project of the Global East currently impossible, as I have argued, I find debating it an intellectually stimulating exercise. One of its potential advantages seems to be that it may allow one to theorize a qualitatively different type of dependence on the Western core from the one which is studied in the framework of post-colonial theory. It may also stimulate new and original methodologies and insights into the workings of the global economic system. Probably the relationships between the so-called second and third worlds, or in the current vocabulary the global South and global East, will also be an exciting topic for that new prospective field, which could take a closer look in particular at instances of direct interaction between these regions (e.g. Ginell 2018; Mark, Kalinovsky, and Marung 2020). In conclusion, one could also note that Müller's project had its precursors; however, their fate, that is, lack of broader interest for similar initiatives, also seems quite characteristic for how little interest for such initiatives both within the region and outside it can be mobilized. One such proposal, which, while it was not mentioned by Müller, is worth particular attention, namely Maxim Waldstein's article on "theorizing second world" (Waldstein 2010). Of particular interest is his suggestion to look at what he called in a more traditional way the second world, but in fact largely corresponds with the scope of the Global East, as a model and resource for nonessentialist and non-Eurocentric theorizing. He also argued about the need of a "move of the area from deep provinces of the contemporary intellectual universe to a position as one of the key 'labs' for producing nonessentialist knowledge about (not only second world) culture and society" (Waldstein 2010, 104). Moreover, he saw the region as "an obvious source of analogies, comparative cases and (...) theoretical insights that are useful for understanding not only Russia and/or Poland but other regions as well, ultimately, human society and culture per se." (Waldstein 2010, 115). The fact that Waldstein's highly stimulating manifesto did not have much resonance, especially outside the circle of Russian origin scholars, is once again very telling and seems to support my pessimistic prognosis.

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Tytuł: Komentarz na temat tekstu Martina Müllera „W poszukiwaniu globalnego wschodu: myślenie między północą a południem”

Abstrakt: W pierwszej części tekstu przedstawiono wspierającą opinię o koncepcji „Globalnego wschodu” Martina Müllera jako przekonującej propozycji użytecznego

narzędzia rozwoju studiów krytycznych nad tzw. światem post-komunistycznym czy też dawnym drugim światem w perspektywie globalnej. W pozostałej części komentarza wymieniono jednak szereg powodów dla których wdrożenie danej koncepcji napotkać może poważne bariery. Należą do nich po pierwsze możliwe opór w krajach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej oraz szersze przyczyny strukturalne ze względu na które wprowadzenie do międzynarodowego obiegu koncepcji równoległej do „Globalnego południa” może być problematyczne. Wśród omówionych krótko podobnych problemów z prowadzeniem nowych koncepcji teoretycznych przedyskutowano doświadczenia złożonej i nie zawsze entuzjastycznej recepcji teorii post-kolonialnej w Polsce.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria postkolonialna, teoria krytyczna, orientalizm, postkomunizm, area studies, peryferie