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East is South: Central Europe in Global Perspective

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EAST IS SOUTH: Reflections on the Budapest Seminar

David Chioni Moore

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat.
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
though they come from the ends of the earth!
—Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*

I. An Educational Experiment

I begin by observing that for a small liberal arts college to undertake an international faculty development seminar in Budapest, such as the July 1995 Macalester seminar that is this volume's subject, is indeed a bold experiment. It requires a considerable chunk of an institution's resources to bring together colleagues from a broad range of disciplines, to interact with visiting scholars who themselves represent divergent perspectives, for three weeks of focused attention to a geography that in most all cases falls outside the ordinary scope of each participant's activities. In the brief pages which follow, I'd like to comment on three distinct aspects of this experiment. First, from an institutional standpoint I will evaluate the success of the experiment itself. Second, to give a concrete example of the impact on one academic of such a seminar, I will outline the unexpected and I believe substantial implications of my Budapest experience for work in my own distant field, namely contemporary postcolonial or "non-Western" literary and cultural studies. Finally, I would like to review some of the seminar's lessons for pedagogy.

And so to the first question: what of the success or failure of this multidisciplinary Budapest seminar? I suspect that in scan-

ning over this volume's dozen or so Macalester faculty seminar assessments, a remarkable uniformity of opinion — positive opinion—will shine through. Colloquy was lively, and collegiality extremely strong. Disciplinary boundaries were broken: an artist critiqued an economist's assumptions while a political scientist delved into the deeper meaning of a theatrical performance, and all joined the debate when an environmental scientist gave his talk. Strong bonds were formed among faculty who in their busy lives "back home" had only rarely had a chance to substantially interact, even on a relatively small campus such as Macalester's. A new faculty member—this writer—was afforded the most extraordinary introduction to his institution that one could imagine. And a new region, or rather an old region too long neglected here in the West, was rediscovered, and will now inform our teaching and scholarly practice in new and unintended ways.

About all of these positive Budapest-seminar outcomes—and my listing has been necessarily brief, and others of my colleagues will surely add to it—there can be little doubt. And yet I can well imagine that in the eyes of many faculty and administrators at Macalester and elsewhere—both those evaluating this particular program and those considering similar future initiatives—a certain skepticism will prevail about such a seminar, a skepticism that may be distilled as follows: did they have to go all the way over *there* (or wherever else such a seminar might be held) simply to accomplish *that*? I'd like to take that question seriously, because it is no doubt asked only for the best reasons of institutional stewardship. And to take that question seriously requires one to ask which of the various aspects of the Macalester international seminar were essential to its success, and which could be profitably jettisoned. A number of the component answers to this question are obvious, but should be listed anyway.

First of all, such a faculty development seminar must be decidedly interdisciplinary, both in terms of the college's participants and in terms of the range of presenters and subjects covered. To do otherwise would merely be to duplicate the narrower kinds of professional development opportunities widely available in the disciplines themselves. One of the great strengths of the smaller liberal arts institution is its relative lack

of walls, and this strength must not be neglected. The second somewhat obvious point about such a seminar is that it must be held out-of-term and as the exclusive focus of its participants during that time. There is simply no other way to catalyze the group dynamics and round-the-clock engagement that constitutes such a seminar's indispensable intensity. I believe that a necessary corollary to this requirement is that some degree not only of temporal but of *physical* isolation — from the campus, office, department, and even to some extent the family — is necessary. In other words, for maximum benefit, a faculty development seminar of this type must be held off-site.

And so then: why not a cabin in the northwoods of Minnesota, a mere two hundred miles from the college? I think a perfectly good argument could be made for faculty development experiences structured along such lines. The list of objectives such a "northwoods" type seminar could accomplish is long, and it could be done relatively cheaply as well. A broad range of themes for such a seminar might find success — themes such as community, creativity, education, or disciplinarity itself — and various U.S.-based specialists on the subject's many dimensions could be brought in. And yet, in the final analysis, the fundamental purpose of Macalester College's summer 1995 seminar was to promote internationalism, and I would like to argue that there is something so valuable about a group actually being in a foreign land, that the "foreign" dimension of such a faculty seminar becomes indispensable to its success. But what is it that is so special about "the foreign"? What is essential about "the foreign" is not, perhaps surprisingly, that one "gets to know," say, Hungary, up close or firsthand. Three weeks is frankly insufficient for more than a good initial appreciation of a culture removed from one's own, and indeed the many of us who are specialists in some other geographic area typically spend decades if not entire lifetimes on our chosen subjects and still never feel fully "inside." More obviously, the value of the foreign is also not that of achieving another stamp in the passport, roll of film in the camera, set of monuments visited, or local beverages quaffed.

Rather — and there is, I believe, no substitute for it — the value of the foreign is to remind us, in one concentrated dose, of our own profound ignorance about the world at large. As profes-

sional scholars, whatever our discipline, we flatter ourselves that as we read up on the new area, teach the new group of international students, or develop at mid-career a further geographic specialty, our knowledge of the world will increase. But the renewed *experience* of the foreign teaches quite the contrary. Both individually, and, importantly, in the context of this seminar *collectively*, to find ourselves in a land whose history, language, and customs are not ours teaches us that our ignorance of the world will always vastly outweigh our positive knowledge of it. For that humbling experience alone, and for the impact that experience can have on the intellectual and pedagogical spirit of an educational institution, I can only conclude that such an overseas seminar, structured in this way and undertaken as a group, is more than worth the expense.

Before moving on to the next section, I would simply like to add that I see no particular reason beyond some narrow reliance on the concept of the nation, that, for example, a rural community in the Tennessee hills, a commune in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, a South Asian neighborhood in Queens, New York, or a fishing community on the rocky coast of Maine might not also, like Budapest and Costa Rica, qualify as “foreign.”

II. Eastern Europe in Global/Postcolonial Perspective

At this point I’d like to turn to my own disciplinary setting, that, again, of contemporary postcolonial and “non-Western” literary studies and cultural theory, to show concretely the intellectual impact on one scholar of study of a region far from his own. Since sometime in the early 1980s, the term “postcolonial” has come to be the principal designator for a range of scholarly activities formerly known as the study of Third World, non-Western, World, Emergent, and/or “Minority” literatures and cultures. This relatively new term “postcolonial” has come into fashion not only because of evident defects in the former vogue labels, but also because postcolonial accurately describes good chunks of the political, social, and cultural situations of peoples in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, the Arab world, and to a lesser extent Latin America, Australia, Canada, Ireland, and even, in a more extended sense, the United States. The cultures of postcolonial lands are said to be characterized by

tensions between autochthony and dependence, resistance and complicity, and imitation and originality. Their passion to escape from their former colonized situation paradoxically gives the former colonial power a disproportionate psychic weight in the newly freed culture. And, the world being as it is, the danger of retrenchment, or of what one might call a neocolonial relationship, is always present.

Because my academic formation has been in this area called postcolonial studies, and because, at least on the face of it, the post-1989 cultures of Eastern and Central Europe might reasonably be termed postcolonial, when I stepped on to the airplane to go to Hungary in early July I anticipated spending considerable time at the Budapest seminar asking to what extent this term “postcolonial” might find application in the region I would visit. And, during my three weeks at the seminar, I was struck powerfully by two things. First, by how extraordinarily postcolonial the societies of the former Soviet client regions (including both the former Soviet republics and the East Bloc buffer states) in fact *are*; and second, by how extraordinarily little — indeed zero — attention is paid to this fact, at least in these terms.

Permit me to spend a moment describing, by way of example, the postcoloniality of Africa. A historically rich and important culture, of great diversity and at times only tenuous unity, has a long history of independence, though at various places and times pillage and occupation were the dominant features. Then, a period of full external colonization and/or imperial control begins. Indigenous forms of government are replaced with puppet control, outright invasion, or a blend of the two. Education is revamped to privilege learning of the imperial language. Histories are rewritten from the perspective of the colonizer, and what is taught in schools — which are more than ever what Althusser would call ideological state apparatuses — becomes highly politicized. Autochthonous religious traditions and forms are suppressed, idols destroyed, and an alternative religion, or even nonreligious faith or ideology is proselytized and promoted. The colonized areas of Africa are treated as economic fiefs. Little or no “natural” trade is allowed between the colonies and economies external to the colonizer’s network. The economic production that does occur is undertaken on a command

basis and is geared to the interests of the dominant power, rather than to local needs or demand. Local currencies, when they exist at all, are generally only convertible to the specie of the "mother" country, and that at unfavorable rates; regardless of political arrangements, this is one of many signs of no sovereignty. Massive experiments in monoculture take place, and environmental degradation ensues. In the more human realm, dissident voices are heard most clearly only in exile, though accession to exile is itself difficult, given metropole-directed travel restrictions and passport controls. Oppositional African cultural energies are therefore channeled through semihidden forms of resistance including mimicry, satire, parody, jokes, and symbolic fiction in its largest sense. But perhaps the dominant feature is cultural stagnation.

And then, independence comes, across Africa, for many states all at once. Yet although resistance had been continuous throughout the colonial period, with periods and places of intense, heroic struggle alternating with quieter times and times of great repression, in some sense this newfound freedom has not been so much "won" as handed over. External forces, world forces, or forces at work only internal to the colonizing powers themselves (England or France, say), seem substantially to be responsible for the sudden turn of African events. There has been no moment more of full national catharsis, victory, or satisfaction, than when a beaten Cornwallis handed over his sword to George Washington at Yorktown in 1781, or when the Vietnamese, against overwhelming odds, defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the Americans at Saigon in 1974. Not surprisingly, the newly independent African nations are in important ways underprepared for self-governance. Formerly flourishing traditions of domestic rule have atrophied, and those local individuals with experience in the management of the state are seen to be tainted by their history of colonial complicity. Thus the former opposition rapidly assumes leadership, though it seems at times that they still have more skills at opposing than at leading. The nations' new governments, anxious to expel the demons of the previous imperial regime, swing the ideological pendulum in the opposite direction, by seeking alliance with the diametric opponent of the regimes that had for so long ruled them.

Attempts are then made in Africa to apply wholesale the principles—economic, social, and otherwise—of this great ideological alternative, at times regardless of the applicability of those principles or of the tragic dislocations they create. In many places, lawlessness, graft, corruption, and a continuation of the less favorable aspects of the colonial-era ways take hold, and a human drain, particularly of intellectuals and those with the greatest potential for economic success, occurs. And so, after the initial euphoria, a period of disillusion sets in, resulting from what Neil Lazarus has called Africa's "preliminary overestimation of emancipatory potential."¹ Now neither the former imperial power, nor the other outside ideological alternative, nor the local ruling elite is seen to have the answers to the most pressing social questions. At times these tensions are expressed in ethnic terms within and between the newly independent states, since official borders, drawn by the former colonizers, show little regard for the ethnic realities of the area. In some places in Africa settler colonies uncomfortably remain, while in other places alien populations that were imported wholesale to serve some function stay put. These "map distortions," combined with more or less authentic differences and the negative stresses produced by economic hardship and radical uncertainty, result in at-times tragic interethnic tensions.

Postcolonial Africa, I suggest, is like this. Or is it *only* Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, and the like? For does not the description of postcoloniality that I have offered in the three paragraphs above not unreasonably also apply to that giant crescent of nations stretching from Estonia to Kazakhstan, and including (it is worth mentioning the entire list, twenty-six in all) Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the remainder of Yugoslavia, Macedonia, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan? I might only leave out Afghanistan, as its coloniality was never complete, and Chechnya, as its coloniality is hardly "post." Close Africanist readers of the above paragraphs will no doubt note numerous exceptions to the postcolonial characteristics I have listed. And scholars of Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia will also surely note dimensions along which the picture I have

sketched out does not apply to their specific areas. But read back over the three paragraphs that precede this one, only now with Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia in mind: I think it should be fairly obvious that the term “postcolonial,” and everything that goes with it, might reasonably be applied to the formerly Soviet-controlled regions post-1989, just as it has long been applied to South Asia post-1949, or to Africa post-1960. East is South.

These obvious postcolonial/post-Soviet parallels in mind, two notable silences have, since my time at the Macalester Budapest seminar, powerfully struck me. The first is the silence of current scholarship in postcolonial studies on the subject of the formerly Soviet-controlled regions. The second silence is its mirror image: the failure of both scholarship and scholars of the formerly Soviet-controlled lands to think of their regions in the useful if by no means perfect “postcolonial” terms developed by scholars of, say, India, Jamaica, and Gabon. In both cases, so far as my limited understanding can tell, the reciprocal silence has been total, if not in some instances hostile. South does not speak East, and East not South. In the world of postcolonial studies with which I am familiar, the subject of the formerly Soviet-controlled sphere is never taken up. In notable synoptic review articles on postcolonial studies, such as those by McClintock² and Dirlik,³ and in recently released major classroom-use postcolonial anthologies by such authors and editors as Ashcroft et al⁴ and Williams and Chrisman,⁵ the broadest range of nations is mentioned, of both colonizers and colonized, yet if one were to color in a blank world map of the states they discuss or even mention, virtually the whole world would be covered except for that former Soviet sphere I am discussing here.

In Eastern and Central European studies — though I must warn the reader that my competence here is vastly more limited — a diametric lack of engagement also seems to obtain. In the nearly forty papers that the Macalester seminar participants read as background for the sessions — papers on the broadest range of topics, from the broadest range of disciplines, written by both American/Western European and Eastern/Central European scholars, and assigned by the broadest range of presenters — almost never were comparisons made between, say, Ukraine and Algeria, Hungary and the Philippines, or Estonia

and Cameroon. And when, during the long question-and-answer sessions that followed each speaker's presentation, several Macalester faculty participants would mention parallels between the home nations of our speakers and the various so-called Third World lands, argument, dismissal, or stonewalling were, frankly, the general response.

As one might imagine, I have only begun to theorize why there is such a total lack of linkage between the Western academy's currently constituted postcolonial studies and scholarly discussions of political and cultural transition in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. On the postcolonial side, a certain historical indebtedness to so-called Three Worlds Theory is no doubt partly to blame. In Three Worlds Theory, the Western European and North American nations constitute the First, the socialist economies the Second, and all that remains — largely the least economically developed of the world's nations — by default become the Third World. An enormous and honorable political commitment to that Third World has been central to much in Three Worlds theorizing. One aspect of that commitment has been, not without reason, a belief that the First World was responsible for many of the Third World's ills, and a concomitant belief that the Second World's path represented a viable alternative. It has been difficult, therefore, for these Three Worlds-based postcolonial theorists to recognize *within* that Second World its clearly First-and-Third, or, rather, postcolonial dynamics. In addition, many postcolonialist scholars, in the United States and elsewhere, have been Marxist or at least sympathetic to Marxism, and therefore have been reluctant to make the Soviet Union a villain on the world stage.

The reluctance, on the other hand, of scholars of Eastern and Central Europe to make the "reverse move" — that is, to recognize that their own situations might profitably be analyzed by importing postcolonialist tools initially developed to talk about, say, Africa, may be laid to a different set of reasons. Some colleagues of mine at Macalester and elsewhere have suggested that a certain theoretical isolation from the larger world-stream, or even a certain theoretical backwardness, have in part caused Central and Eastern Europe's ignorance of postcoloniality as such. This may be true, but at the same time I would like to suggest that there are yet more powerful dynamics at work that

cause the gap. One of them is certainly a belief, on the part of the Central Europeans in particular (I can make no guess about the Central Asians), that they are radically culturally different from South and East Asians and Africans. Yet all the same, while one may recognize that large gaps do exist between the cultures, of, say, Poland and Bulgaria versus those of Pakistan and Sri Lanka, one must also note that such differences have not prevented Irish scholars, for example, from making important use of African postcolonial paradigms in evaluating their own island's situation. Thus one must be careful that the gaps that Eastern and Central European scholars perceive between their own situations and those of, say, Kenya or Haiti, do not become mere covers for a refusal of another kind: that of racism. I cannot hide the fact that a number of the Macalester participants in this seminar, myself included, sensed the potential for such deplorable thinking on the part of more than one of our speakers.

Another reason for the resistance to think postcolonially on the part of Central European scholars is, I believe, a very artifact of their postcoloniality itself. As a long line of theorists of colonization have argued, one of the results of an extended period of imperial subjugation is that a people who have been forcibly deprived of an unfettered, internally generated cultural development or self-expression take on a broad range of compensatory behaviors in response. One of these expressions is an exaggerated desire to return to "authentic sources," generally a mythic set of heroic ancestors who in times past controlled a much greater geographic territory than the people now encompass. And another of these expressions is termed mimicry: in which the cultural form that for so long was simultaneously officially banned and privately worshipped becomes as a result an object of disproportionate desire on the part of the subjugated peoples. In India a worst case might be the perfectly Anglicized Anglo-Indian postcolonial subject, whose accent and manners, literary interests and sporting endeavors match to an almost caricatural degree that of some mythical English gentleman who in fact almost never exists. During our time at the Budapest seminar, I believe many of the Macalester participants, myself included, became struck by the regularity, frequency, and intensity of our speakers' claims that their cultures were in fact "of the West," and a West that was seen to have improbably few

flaws. Our speakers' claims of Western affiliation were, of course, not without reason, but looked at another way they must also be theorized along the Shakespearean principle of "the lady doth protest too much."⁶ Or, put another way, put in an extreme situation of postcolonial mimicry and stress, one may become (wrongly) convinced, in Central Europe, that Europe's former East is so definitively of the West that it could not possibly be, in any way, like the world's South.

It should go without saying that I will pursue this suggestive set of questions in further detail in a future paper.

III. Closing Reflections on the Pedagogical

I will close my reflections with a pedagogical note, by returning to a theme I raised earlier in this paper: that of the value of knowing one's ignorance. At Macalester I am one of a few professors whose primary departmental commitment is not to a traditionally constituted discipline but to International Studies itself. And in this role I teach, at both introductory and senior-seminar levels, courses specifically in this thing called International Studies. But what should I teach? It is of course tempting to try to "cover the whole world"—to do a week on this, a week on that, and hopefully in the end to have taught one's students a thing or two about the planet. And initially, when I left for Budapest, at least one small part of me said, "Ah, David, you've been to forty countries and here come another five. Now when students come to you and say, 'Professor Moore, what about the situation in country X,' there will be five more nations on which I can opine with some authority."

But the lesson, I am happy to report, has been quite the opposite. Put into Budapest I returned to the role of student: an active, engaged, indeed aggressive student, but a student nonetheless. And in that brief return to student status I rediscovered a valuable lesson about my role as teacher: that I don't know all that much; or, put another way, that mostly what I have learned to do as a scholar is to manage my ignorance somewhat better than do my students. What I should teach, then, is not so much a knowledge-dump or fact-collection, but rather a way of questioning, a way of making certain that when my students-of-the-world receive their Macalester diplomas, they

become, like me, not *ex-* but *better* worldly students. And in that spirit I will close with a brief passage from Johann Gottfried Herder:

I stand in this abyss and I am lost no matter where I turn. I see a great work without a name, and yet it is full of names, voices, and powers. I do not feel as if I am standing at that place where the harmony of all these voices converge. I am able to hear, however, in my own context that the diminished, confusing sounds have a certain harmony. This much I know and hear indeed.⁷

Notes

1. Neil Lazarus, "Great Expectations and After: The Politics of Postcolonialism in African Fiction," *Social Text* 13–14 (Winter–Spring 1986): 49–63.
2. Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" *Social Text* 10, nos. 2 and 3 (31–32) (Spring 1992): 84–98.
3. Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 328–56.
4. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
5. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
6. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet Prince of Denmark* in *The Pelican Shakespeare*, Willard Farnham, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1970): act 3, scene 2, line 222.
7. Johann Gottfried Herder, "Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Development of Mankind" [1774]. Excerpted in Herder, *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History*. Translated and edited by Marcia Bunge (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993): 38–47.