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Dimensions of Europe - Dimensions of Europeanization

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Maria Todorova

Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
mtodorov@illinois.edu

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Some years ago, the Romanian writer Mircea Cartarescu was approached by a German publisher at the Frankfurt book fair, who said he was interested in Eastern European writers. Cartarescu immediately responded that he did not consider himself an Eastern European writer. "Of course," the publisher conceded, "as a Romanian you are from Southeastern Europe."¹ For Cartarescu this simple spacing had the following direct message: "Stay where you are," the publisher was telling me in a friendly manner. "Stay in your own ghetto. Describe your tiny chunk of (South) Eastern European history. Write about your Securitate, about your Ceausescu, about your People's House. About your dogs, your homeless children, your Gypsies. Be proud with your dissidence during the communist days. Leave it to us to write about love, death, happiness, agony, and ecstasy. Leave it to us to create the avant-garde, to innovate, to breathe cultural normality. Your only chance here is to describe your small exotic world for some small publishing house that might accept you... Just choose: either you confirm our clichés or you disappear." Cartarescu was furious. He could not accept the triple division of Europe into Western, Central, and Eastern, let alone the Southeastern subdivision of the subdivision. "Western Europe, Central Europe, Eastern Europe. Civilization, neurosis, chaos. Prosperity, culture, and chaos. Consciousness, subconsciousness, and chaos." Cartarescu had read Musil, in whom he saw not Kakanien, but a prince of the European spirit. He didn't care which country Andre Breton came from. He didn't trace Bulgakov's Kiev on a map. "I haven't read Catulus, Rabelais, Cantemir, and Virginia Woolf from some geographic map," he wrote, "but from the library, where books are arranged next to each other." And he concluded: "There are many Europes in space and in time, in dreams and in memories, in reality and in the imagination. I claim only one of them, my Europe, easily recognizable, because it has the shape of my brain. It has this shape, because [my brain] has modeled it from the outset after itself." How do we "Europeanize" a person such as Cartarescu who is from the "periphery"? The periphery of what? And what is a periphery?

* Maria Todorova is the Gutsell Professor of History at the Department of History University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The current article is based on talk delivered at the University of Graz, 26 June 2019 at the launch of the Field of Excellence "Dimensions of Europeanization"

¹ Cartarescu, Mircea. 2004. Europa has the Form of my Brain. Interview in the Bulgarian newspaper *Kultura* 23 (2325), May 28, 2004, 12.

The notions of *core* and *periphery* were introduced in the 1950s in the vocabulary of the United Nations, specifically the Economic Commission on Latin America. They were theorized later by Immanuel Wallerstein in world-system theory that stressed the processual character of these concepts: “In world-system analysis, core-periphery is a relational concept, not a pair of terms that are reified, that is, have separate essential meanings.”² Standing on but critically complicating dependency theory, world-system theory was mostly used to describe the international division of labor and its repercussions on the social system. Within this framework, others developed a comparative theory of the semi-periphery, which is supposed to occupy “a structural position which often has developmental (or evolutionary) significance,”³ and to which Eastern Europe is often added. While criticized for its excessive economism and neglect of social class and culture, the influence of world-systems analysis is undisputed, and the notions *core* and *periphery* have entered everyday use, so much so that a “peripheral” status is accorded to *all* aspects of life in economically peripheral territories. But, as Osterhammel has argued, “[p]olitical geography does not coincide with economic geography, and the global distribution of cultural cores is different from that of the concentrations of military power.”⁴ Others have warned that a number of cultural categories, among them center-periphery, East-West or public-private, are “indexical signs that are always relative: dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional context in which they are used.”⁵ Not only does core-periphery indicate a relation, it always indicates an asymmetrical relation and “what matters is the self-understanding of the actor: does (s)he think that her or his opinion is in the ‘catch up’ part of the yardstick, or does (s)he experience being part of an ascendant or even dominant culture?”⁶ Even as I concede that the category “periphery” continues to have salience “as both critical concept and media shorthand for (relative) backwardness,”⁷ I want to point out that it shamelessly translates economic wealth to other social and cultural spheres. And so it is with Europe.

Europe, like the Trinity, has three hypostases: the Name, the Place, and the Idea, and they all have divine claims. They also all have spaces as one of their central attributes. The *name* belonged first to a consort of the chief God, and she rode on his back (in his incarnation as a bull) from Asia Minor to Crete; it meant something beautiful, big-eyed, broad-faced and just huge. The *place* was first identified by the island Greeks, who named Europe the mainland stretching north from the Peloponnesus, the area we call today the Balkans. It was the center of their world and for a certain period of time, the center of the

² Hopkins, Terence / Wallerstein, Immanuel and associates. 1982. *World-Systems Analysis: Theory and Methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 17.

³ Chase-Dunn, Christopher. 1988. Comparing World-Systems: Toward a Theory of Semiperipheral Development. *The Comparative Civilizations Review* 18, 29-38, 31.

⁴ Osterhammel, Jürgen. 2014. *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 78.

⁵ Gal, Susan. 2002. A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13(1), 77-95, 80.

⁶ Stenius, Henrik. 2017. *Concepts in a Nordic Periphery*, in *Conceptual History in the European Space*, edited by Steinmetz, Willibald / Freedden, Michael and Javier Fernandez-Sebastian. New York: Berghahn, 263-80, 264.

⁷ Ballinger, Pamela. 2017. Whatever Happened to Eastern Europe? Revisiting Europe’s Eastern Peripheries. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 31(1), 44-67, 61.

ancient world. In the course of several centuries it extended its space westwards, encompassing the whole western Eurasian peninsula, and then it started contracting its space, to be finally expropriated by its westernmost part. It was in this period, especially after the Great Schism of the 11th century and then with the coming of the Ottomans, that the name was finally divorced from its Middle Eastern origins. Christianity is supposed to be the definitive and intrinsic characteristic of European culture and nowadays is erected as the central pillar of Fortress Europa. But as the latest magisterial *Eerdmans Encyclopedia of Early Christian Art and Archaeology* reminds us, its center of gravity lay not in Rome nor Constantinople, but in the Middle East, and it was part of the trilogy of West Asian religions with nothing specifically European about it.⁸ In fact, with its trinitarian doctrine it made tritheism official and launched a rather hypocritical war on the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Islam, as some detractors have said. Once contracted to Western Europe (what some authors call Visigothic Europe), this part became known as the European Union after the Second World War, and some 20 years ago began its slow eastward expansion. While not quite godlike, it certainly has regal airs, although its crown nowadays seems a little rusty. Finally, the *idea* of Europe or, rather, an ideal of Europe, undoubtedly has its divine pretensions as a value system; it has succeeded in creating itself by defining what it is *not*, to paraphrase the late Edward Said's characterization of culture (another category that is questioned in the project), it is constantly practicing a differentiation of itself from what it believes to be not itself. This ideal type is widely disseminated, although not entirely uncontested. The understanding of Europe, notoriously, does not create a consensus and cannot be mandated. A recent study on the teaching of Europe's history at the school level shows that for educators "Europe is mainly understood as a geographical concept [and its history] as the history of some large western European countries plus Russia." Scandinavians, Celts, and East Europeans of all ilk lament that their histories remain invisible. Students, by contrast, do not treat Europe as mere geography but are equally distributed among those who see it as the birthplace of democracy, enlightenment, and progress; or, contrastingly, a club of rich white countries guilty of economic and ecological exploitation; as a solution to European contradiction; or a danger to sovereign nations. Perceptions of the European past include Christian tradition, weak cultural diversity, and permanent conflict, whereas perceptions of the European present are tantamount to peace, modernism, citizenship, and cultural diversity. All these perceptions are, of course, the ones students have picked up and internalized somewhere—at school, at home, and in the public space. If historians shyly bring in Europe's dubious pasts, or more vehemently lambast Eurocentrism, and post-colonialists attempt to "de-center" it, for practical purposes the idea is proving very powerful and convenient even for the skeptics (and I confess that although I belong to the skeptics I still share in the desire to keep up the ideal, however fraught or imagined).

Like Europe, the concept of Europeanization can also be approached as a triad but it is less saintly than the trinity; it looks more like the three-headed Cerberus, the hound guarding the gates of the Underworld or maybe the many-headed Hydra (any analogy is unintended). Its first, traditional, neutral and

⁸ Goody, Jack. 2006. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 289.

most innocent sense (or essence, or head) was that of the 18th-19th century, used to describe the modernizing efforts of different polities: Petrine Russia, the Ottoman Tanzimat, Meiji Japan, etc.). When I wrote my first book (many decades ago) on the Tanzimat reforms, I used it without any compunctions. In the Ottoman Empire the reforms were referred to as *Avrupalılařma* = Europeanization, as a matter of fact without any pejorative connotation; i.e. it was an emic category. It referred to the borrowing of institutions as tools from a toolkit, mostly to meet geopolitical needs in the constant great-power competition. These were not only economic and military tools, but also cultural ones (in education, in the legal sphere, in fashion, and in the arts).⁹ I am evoking this history because even at the time the accusation both from within (by conservatives opposed to the reforms) and by outsiders (impatient with their pace and quality) was that this was simply imitation, imitating institutions considered “organic” for the West, which were transformed and deformed when travelling to the East where they were planted on unfavorable soil. This brings in, of course, the debates on authenticity. Processes such as industrialization, liberalization, democratization, republicanism etc. were equally and gradually travelling and taking root in the West itself, but we tend to forget that this gradual procession was a fairly recent historical process; instead we often deal only with the final result which we pronounce authentic. I do not think the modernizing reforms of the 18-20th centuries were imitation, and I could argue it for the Ottoman Empire and Russia as well. Someone else would be able to do it best for Japan and so on, but it highlights this important notion of naked and uncreative *imitation*, which today is again hurled at the societies of Eastern Europe, and this is an aspect that ought to be seriously researched

In a recent article, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes speak of today’s East European predicament as “an illiberal mutant... implementing a clever policy of piecemeal imitation.”¹⁰ According to them, 1989 legitimized the politics of imitation understood as the shortest pathway to freedom and posterity. But, interestingly, they are unclear about the mechanisms of this imitation. On the one hand, they write about a voluntary chosen imitation, on the other hand they insist on an imposed imitation imperative which “comes to feel like a loss of sovereignty.”¹¹ Unlike the much-touted phrase of Francois Furet that “not a single new idea has come out of Eastern Europe in 1989” (with which Habermas apparently seemed to concur),¹² there were numerous visions and strategies. (And as far as the novelty of ideas is concerned, we historians are very skeptical about the rehashing of old ideas that are passed for new.) The acceptance (or, as I will address it, the *imposition*) of one vision and strategy and the motivation behind that imposition need further analysis. When I say imposed, I mean not only from the outside, as a condition for accessions, but also from the inside, by the internal neo-liberal elites that came to power. And here again, we need to be careful, since these elites continue to call themselves the guardians of liberal democracy. There is, however, a dramatic distinction

⁹ Todorova, Maria. 1983. *Angliya, Rossiya i Tanzimat*. Moscow: Nauka, Glavnoe izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury.

¹⁰ Krastev, Ivan and Stephen Holmes. 2018. Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents. *Journal of Democracy* 29(3), 117-28.

¹¹ Krastev and Holmes. *Explaining Eastern Europe*, 118.

¹² Krastev and Holmes. *Explaining Eastern Europe*, 120.

between liberalism and neoliberalism. Classical liberalism (as a few recent books remind us)¹³ had little to do with the individualistic ideology and laissez-faire capitalism linked to John Locke and which became predominant in the Anglo-American world. Instead, classic liberalism had its roots on the continent, particularly the French Revolution. It was infused with a strong social component, a moral message for the common good, and strove to maximize democratic participation. Neo-liberalism has been entirely focused on the economy and the unrestricted free market. There were no referenda in Eastern Europe on the ways forward; the first free elections simply toppled the old elites. The Jeffrey Sachs and Balcerowicz types of reforms that came to be the imitation in practice for the whole region were in fact not an imitation of *any* existing western practices or institution. Shock-therapy (and I am passing no judgment) was a new remedy experienced by and experimented on Eastern Europe. In any case, the notion of “imitation” as a way to Europeanization needs to be seriously interrogated.

There was an additional dimension to this type of Europeanization and it had to do with achieving a stable society. It meant trying to emulate the nation-building of the western societies who were seen as stable because of their ethnic homogeneity and homogenizing politics (especially the French). Let us not forget that Bismarck dismissed the Grossdeutsche version of his empire because of the excessive ethnic diversity of the Habsburgs. The irony is that after World War II Eastern Europe reached a relative ethnic homogeneity; whereas Western Europe, with the consequences of decolonization browned considerably, and despite the usual use of “xenophobic Eastern Europeans” as scapegoats, it is Western Europe which is most alarmist about Islam and emigration. The largest Muslim presence in Europe (outside the overwhelmingly Muslim Bosnia and Albania) is in Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Cyprus (between 10 and 20%). Yet, the real anti-Muslim hysteria does not come from them but from France, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the UK where they are less than 10%. Interestingly enough it is true that the biggest xenophobes are countries where Muslims are less than 1% (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, the Baltics) but then, these are not the Balkans but the civilized Central Europeans who deserved first to “return” to Europe.

After the Second World War, with the processes of de-colonialization and Europeanization acquired a negative - and I would say harmful - connotation. This was also accompanied by the demise of developmentalism (mostly in Africa) and modernization theory by the 1960s, when the proper term was “westernization” adding the influence of the premier great power, the USA. Emulating Europe was seen as ethnocentric and thus, the second head of the beast becomes Eurocentrism. Quite apart from the real record of Europe, there is the harm of applying a universalist terminology to the world which is based entirely on Europe. I am not to repeat here what many critics have said, but I will mention Jack Goody’s magisterial “The Theft of History” in which he

¹³ E.g. Edelstein, Dan. 2018. *On the Spirit of Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Miller, James. 2018. *Can Democracy Work? A Short History of a Radical Idea, from Ancient Athens to Our World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Rosenblatt, Helena. 2018. *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; see: Bell, David A. 2019. [The Many Lives of Liberalism](#). *The New York Review of Books* 66(1), 17. January (accessed: 16. October 2019).

demonstrated the take-over of history by the west: “the past is conceptualized and presented according to what happened on the provincial scale of Europe, often western Europe, and then imposed upon the rest of the world.”¹⁴ There is much to be said for this and yet, one can retain an ambivalent attitude, especially in the US where Eurocentrism is one of the central targets of political correctness. There is also the natural reaction (not necessarily conservative or racist as in John Headley’s “The Europeanization of the World” against negating the historically premier powerful position of Europe for the last half millennium (which, in the end, is a fairly short stretch of time).¹⁵

Here is the place to revisit our conceptual apparatus which came under attack with the critique of modernization and diffusion theory. Heretofore ideas and institutions were usually described in a specific language: they “penetrate,” they “exert influence,” they are being “diffused,” “transmitted,” “transformed,” and “deformed.” The countries that were the object of this diffusion were, accordingly, imitative and derivative. With the advent of transfer studies, this vocabulary became somewhat more subtle: knowledge was “circulated,” “appropriated,” ideas were “translated,” “transplanted;” adapted in a communicative action, stressing the processual character of the transfer, cultural mixing, and hybridization. Transfer studies, sometimes too strongly contrasted to comparative studies, were supposed to overcome the assumption inbuilt in comparison about static units of analysis and, instead, study processes in transformation. An additional advantage was that while comparison tended to focus on synchrony, inquiry into transfer favored a diachronic perspective. Even though “transfer” introduced a greater flexibility and dynamism in the analysis, transfer studies came with their inbuilt problems, the most important being the fixed frames of reference that included the points of departure and arrival. Today the proper framework is that of entangled history, *histoire croisée*, with its insistence on “a multidimensional approach that acknowledges plurality and the complex configurations that result from it.”¹⁶ This does not evade the asymmetry of the relationship, not only in the sense of an unequal starting point, but also in the sense of not being affected in the same manner by the interaction. The important point, however, is that the two sides of the intercrossing remain active. Thus we should be very careful how we apply it to Southeastern Europe, where the power relation is hugely lopsided.

Here we should also evoke another dimension or sub-characteristic: Europeanization as part of European imperialism and colonialism. It is symptomatic that the Balkans have the only two colonial (or quasi-colonial) territories of Europe alongside Ireland where the *mission civilisatrice* was played out: Albania as an Italian colony and Bosnia as an Austrian one (the

¹⁴ Goody. *The Theft of History*, 1.

¹⁵ Headley, John. 2007. *The Europeanization of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ To mention just a few titles on these historiographical developments, see Espagne, Michel. 1999. *Les transferts culturels franco-allemand*. Paris: PUF; Espagne, Michel and Michael Werner. (eds.). 1988. *Transfers: Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et XIXe siècle)*. Paris: Editions recherches sur les civilisations; Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard und Jürgen Kocka. (eds.). 1996. *Geschichte und Vergleich. Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag; Middel, Matthias. 2000. *Kulturtransfer und Vergleich*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitäts Verlag.

work of Bojan Aleksov and Clemens Ruthner). It is a sublime irony that Eastern Europe (including the Balkans) is sharing and carrying the “white man’s burden” of the western part of Europe vis-à-vis the world, even as their western counterparts do not recognize them as authentic. But it has to be admitted that they are not only victims in this; they themselves also display an astounding amount of racial prejudice vis-à-vis their browner fellow-humans. Colonialism and post-colonialism is a category which needs to be explored in depth here since it has begun to be indiscriminately applied to Eastern Europe and especially to the Balkans. I have been on record as opposing this historically and will not go in length arguing my case, but essentially it comes down to my conviction that neither the Ottoman, nor the Habsburg, nor Romanov empires as they were placed in Eastern Europe can be treated as late colonial empires (there are exceptions in their last decades but vis-à-vis other territories in Africa or Central Asia). Neither do I think can the Soviet Union be treated as such in its relationship with Eastern Europe. But it has become cool and more academic to substitute the “Turkish yoke” or “Soviet yoke” with Ottoman and Soviet colonialism and pronounce the Balkans as the author of the first global model of decolonization.¹⁷ Why specifically “decolonization” is used over a quantity of other analogues has mostly to do with its metaphorical and emancipatory power, evoking the saintly specters of Mahatma Ghandi and Frantz Fanon. The emancipatory mantle of “decolonization” all too often serves as a cover for the perpetual lament of self-victimization. One hears the congruent overtones between old-fashioned nationalism and ultra-fashionable post-colonialism when it comes to lament the colonial status of the Balkans vis-à-vis the Ottomans or of Eastern Europe vis-à-vis the Soviets. Ironically, the Habsburgs served as a useful tool promoting the myth of Central Europe, so their civilizing mission was inversely promoted by the Central European marginals in their quest of accession to the European Union. And yet, what is interesting is that the argument about coloniality is revived today rhetorically in some quarters of Eastern Europe not only about the USSR but also vis-à-vis the European Union. At a recent symposium in New York marking 30 years after 1989, I first heard the slogan “Brussels is the new Moscow” (ascribed to the Czechs). In highlighting the new common East European experience of marginality, some East European intellectuals (beginning in literary theory) call for opening up of categories that were hitherto used almost exclusively to conceptualize the non-European experience. In this vision, the application of post-colonial studies serves largely emancipatory goals; it empowers East European intellectuals by propelling them into a paradigm which by now pretends to be speaking a universal language.

Membership in the European Union comes with identity side effects. As a prominent Bulgarian intellectual and member of the neo-liberal elite (the economist Rumén Avramov) remarked: “Backwardness becomes more transparent to the extent that it is not the same to be a relatively poor country outside and the poorest one inside an affluent community.”¹⁸ Identity issues aside, there is no doubt that there is a double standard and two-tiered

¹⁷ See Snyder, Timothy. 2015. Integration and Disintegration: Europe, Ukraine, and the World. *Slavic Review* 74(4), 695-707. For a response, see Todorova, Maria. 2015. On Public Intellectuals and Their Conceptual Frameworks. *Slavic Review* 74(4), 708-14.

¹⁸ Avramov, Roumen. 2016. Bulgaria in Europe – Societal Legacies, Models and Targets: A Personal Outlook. *Euxeinos* 21, 33-39, 36.

membership in the EU, and this is broadly recognized. After the 2008 crisis and recession, European rules are applied differently. Again a quote from Avramov (and again, I should add that this is an impeccable liberal Europeanizer, not a socialist critic): “Policies rightly considered as vicious in the periphery (massive bail-outs of irresponsible debtors or imprudent creditors) are applied in the core countries.”¹⁹ This brings me to an important question raised by Krastev and Holmes, who maintain that:

*“In order to reconcile the idea of ‘normal’ (meaning what is widespread at home) with what is normatively obligatory in the countries they aim to imitate, East Europeans consciously or unconsciously have begun to ‘normalize’ the model countries, arguing that what is widespread in the East is also prevalent in the West, even though Westerners hypocritically pretend that their societies are different. East Europeans often relieve their normative dissonance—say, between paying bribes to survive in the East and fighting corruption to be accepted in the West—by concluding that the West is really just as corrupt as the East, but Westerners are simply in denial and hiding the truth.”*²⁰

This to me seems to be a gesture of ultimate aggressive defensiveness, as the verity of the statement is never addressed. What if indeed westerners are in denial? What if small corruption that is allegedly intrinsic to the New Europe is visible and ugly whereas the large corruption of the Old Europe is civilized and legalized? And it is not true that this pose of “normalizing” the west is ubiquitous. What is ubiquitous is self-criticism and self-degradation.²¹

Europeanization through rationality and Enlightenment is a worthy ideal, but the enlightened agents themselves have not reached it. (To take an example from the Enlightenment itself, which the Balkans have missed together with the Renaissance and Reformation, Voltaire held that Jews were not Europeans but Asiatics: “all of them born with raging fanaticism in their heart, just as the Bretons and Germans are born with blond hair.” And the “Blacks are not men, except in their stature.”²² This was certainly not the case in the unenlightened Southeastern Europe. Edi Rama, the prime-minister of Albania, said in a recent interview in the *Guardian*: “It’s very Balkanic what’s happening in Britain. Deal, no deal. Soft border, hard border, no agreements. It’s the Balkans! It is like the Bosnian parliament! While we are trying to Europeanize, it looks like they are Balkanizing!”²³ This brings us to the last and perhaps only unambiguously noble and positive hypostasis to Europeanization, its essence as an ideal. And this is perfectly fine. Except that this particular dimension of Europeanization should correspond to the whole dimension of Europe and be a perhaps distant ideal for the whole continent, not only for its SEE corner.

¹⁹ Avramov. *Bulgaria in Europe*, 37.

²⁰ Krastev and Holmes, *Explaining Eastern Europe*, 122.

²¹ A recent book announcement of a book to come from the region is titled *Balkanizing Europeanization: Fight against Corruption and Regional Relations in the Western Balkans* edited by Vladimir Vuckovic and Vladimir Djordjevic.

²² Appiah, Kwame A. 2019. *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. *The New York Review of Books* 66(8), 9. May 2019, 40 (accessed: 16. October 2019).

²³ Walker, Shaun. 2019. *Edi Rama, Albania’s unconventional PM who wants to escape the ‘curse of history’*. *The Guardian*, 10. June 2019 (accessed: 25. October 2019).

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