

Estonian and Baltic Nationalisms Through Postcolonial Lens

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By now it has been discussed repeatedly, if the postcolonial theory and methods are a good “fit“ to study the Baltic states (or other parts of the former Soviet bloc). Both the sociopolitical aspect (Annus, Moore, Račevskis) and the cultural-aesthetic aspect (Kirss, Peiker) have been considered in terms of their affinity to the situation of the overseas colonies of Western Europe. Next to that it is important to consider *why* one chooses to take the postcolonial approach in a particular instance: what are the intellectual and - in the broad sense - political goals and implications. My proposed article will hold that studies of nationalism is one key area where the postcolonial perspective could qualitatively aid the understanding of the Soviet period and the decolonization processes of 1980s-1990s, as well as the developments in the independent post-Soviet Baltic republics. I will mainly concentrate on the Estonian case, but with an assumption that there are parallels in the other Baltic states and (to a lesser degree) on the former Soviet bloc as a whole.

Viewing the Soviet power as a colonial one will enable to describe the popular anti-status-quo movements emerging during the second half of 1980s as decolonizing and thus analyse the role of national mobilisation in them from a better angle. I will argue that it is not enough to explain the nationalism of the Baltic movements by terming it the only identity resource readily available in the circumstances of the suppression of civic interaction under the Soviet power (although that may be part of the story). It is necessary to consider the role that nationalism has played in the histories of democratization and decolonization in a more generalised, historically aware and comparative perspective (cf. from the postcolonial perspective e.g. Calhoun, Cheah, Neil Lazarus's *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*).

I want to emphasize I do not make the proposition to view Baltic national movements as decolonizing and post-independence nationalisms as postcolonial with the aim of national heroization. Even less do I want to add to the many competing victimhood claims in the world. Rather my ideological trigger is my dissatisfaction with the unreflective manner mainstream liberalism tends to pathologise all nationalism as “a moral mistake” (Craig: 1, he is critical of this attitude). The pathologizing view sees nationalism as something tribal and antiquated, failing to analyse it as a modern phenomenon which frequently involves struggles not only for national sovereignty, but also for new political institutions perceived as more just and democratic. In

Estonia itself issues relating to ethnicity and nationhood (such as national movements, nation-building processes, inter-ethnic conflicts, etc.) are today habitually treated within the parameters of a mutual offensive between conservative nationalists (considered (proto-)fascists by adversaries) and liberal cosmopolitans (neo-colonisers or “self-colonisers“ according to the other side). I believe that reviewing the questions in the framework of Postcolonial Studies may enable better insight into the mechanics of that deadlock.

True, the paradigm dismissive of nationalism is also hegemonic in the field of Postcolonial Studies. According to Simon Gikandi, for one, the manner postcolonial studies are constructed today by the likes of Homi Bhabha, there is not much between (neo-)colonial oppression and diasporic postmodernism. The decolonization processes, nation- and state-building efforts are largely ignored. However, Gikandi writes this in tribute to Pheng Cheah's *Spectral Nationality* which addresses the gap in an innovative manner.

Cheah opens up 'nationalism' as a philosophical concept, at its roots closely intertwined with those of (political and spiritual) freedom, culture and *Bildung*. An aspect especially relevant for the Baltic field is Cheah's careful and detailed archaeology of the connection between the German 18th-19th century ideas of individual and collective self-actualization (*Bildung*) on the one hand, and the liberal-universalist ideas of emancipation on the other, which Cheah conducts with the purpose of making a comparison between this European nexus and the decolonizing national thought outside Europe. The latter he explores in publicist writing, as well as in the post-independence *Bildungsromans* by the Indonesian author Praemoedya Ananta Toer and the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

There are historical links of mediation between the German classic-romantic ideas and decolonizing nationalist ones. However, Pheng insists that more useful than to analyse the latter as derivative is to consider them comparable responses to similar kind of “immense structural transformation” (Cheah 6), be it Napoleonic invasion, 19th century imperialism or rapid uneven modernization. What studies of decolonizing nationalisms like Cheah's can help a Baltic scholar with is by offering a reflective intellectual space in which to examine the comparable post-Soviet processes without idealising or demonising them or taking for granted that they ought to fit a Western grid of normality - *as it is not taken for granted in Postcolonial Studies*.

I do not mean, of course, to explain the specificities of the post-Soviet Estonian society with some deep primeval cultural idiosyncracies. Rather, the talk is of the particular political-sociocultural imprint left by the experience of triple colonization, native and imposed aspects of modernity and struggles for political emancipation. These all shape the present-day Estonian definitions of collective self and influence present political and sociocultural imagination. The definitions in their turn are continuously internally contested by different actors and are not unchanging, but the modes of contest too are conditioned by previous history. A central issue in the post-Soviet nation-building is the role of the Soviet period settlers who sometimes come to be lumped together as “the colonizer” by Estonians. Yet they have various contesting narratives about their own contribution to the decolonization and their share in the nation (see e.g. Grigorjan and Rosenfeld). Here the postcolonial lens can help to foreground the problematics of collective *formation* which theories of democracy tend not to address (Craig 80). As Craig points out, if one defines a political nation by its will to political self-determination, one needs to enquire who is included in or excluded from the self (96-97).

To develop the “programmatically” approach outlined above I also propose to discuss Andrus Kivirähk's novel *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* which offers relevant thematic and formal parallels to the *Bildungsromans* analysed by Cheah.

Works Cited

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