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Framing Criticism and Knowledge Production in Semi-peripheries – Post-socialism Unpacked

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Abstract¹

More than two and a half decades after the demise of actually existing socialism, much of the contemporary literature produced about CEE is still organized around a dichotomy between socialism and post-socialism, transforming the region in an epistemic enclave. This paper clarifies the agency of scholars from both the West and the East in producing these epistemic landscapes. It contributes, in particular, to the analyses that describe peripheries-developed devices that contribute to the asymmetries between the core and its academic hinterlands. I address the positioning games played by the CEE scholars, the modalities in which their various critical agendas became embedded in global fluxes of ideas, and their important role in co-producing the self-Orientalizing narrative on ‘socialism’ and ‘post-socialism’. Following the debate between Thelen (2011; 2012) and Dunn & Verdery (2011) over postsocialism as a strategic case, my contention is that epistemic enclavisation of the region spring from those types of global partnerships, which forged critical alliances predicated on attributing history to the West and taking out the East from the ‘normal’ flow of history. I further develop this point through an example, the understanding of socialist urbanization in the 1980s and 1990s. I show why the over-emphasis on socialism/capitalism, socialism /post-socialism differences and the underestimation of similarities is a wrong analytical option. I plead for a more Gramscian understanding of counter-hegemonic alliance-making.

Keywords: socialism, post-socialism, post-colonialism, coevalness, referential history, underurbanization, partial-proletarianization

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An Epistemic Oasis

More than two decades after the demise of actually existing socialism, much of the contemporary literature produced about Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is still organized around a dichotomy between socialism and post-socialism (Gille, 2010; Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). Social transformations of the last two and a half decades periodically swayed the epistemic balance between rejection and embracing of a special regime conferred by the status of 'post', which came with the fall of actually-existing-socialism (Stemming and Hörschelmann, 2008). The region seems to continue to emerge as a distinct epistemic oasis. The concepts with the greatest explanatory potential and with the greatest academic coverage (bureaucratic collectivism, mirror comparison, redistribution, shortage economy, dictatorship over needs, the politics of duplicity, informal economy, fuzzy property, recombined property, managerialism) have transformed, arguably, the CEE into a space with its own rules of composition, different, and most of the time incomparable with the rest of the world (Stemming and Hörschelmann, 2008; Pobłocki, 2009; Gille, 2010; Thelen, 2011). In this essay I question the mechanisms and the responsibility for the production of this particular knowledge regime by proposing some twists in the narratives liable for the epistemic provincialization of the region.

The provincialization of CEE is hardly a surprise if integrated in a greater time frame. CEE became the internal other of capitalist Europe in the struggles of imperial formation across the continent in the Renaissance era, of the 16th and 17th centuries (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012) and the industrial-agrarian labor division of the Enlightenment era of 18th and 19th centuries (Boatcă, 2003; Boatcă and Costa, 2012; Dzenovska, 2013). Central and Eastern Europe became a land of beasts, vampires and werewolves at the end of the 19th, and then again at the end of the 20th century the object of modernization endeavors, the Orient of Occident (Pobłocki, 2009; Todorova and Gille, 2010) in need of new institutions to reshape a 'traditional society' (Boatcă, 2003). The current temporal division between the socialist and its post-epoch played, in various disguises on such transition discourses, the role of re-iterating a geo-epistemic boundary through which the region was re-created as a special island with its own laws, which seemingly escaped global capitalist history. The challenge to produce a non-Orientalizing narrative about CEE (Todorova and Gille, 2010; Boatcă and Costa, 2012) was not without a response.

In the last decade the post-colonial and de-colonial options played a great role in taking up the task of reconstructing knowledge production about CEE beyond the socialist and post-socialist dichotomy. Several special issues appeared in the attempt to wed post-colonial and post-socialist debates (Mignolo, 2006; Owczarzak, 2009; Tulbure, 2009; Kołodziejczyk and Șandru, 2012; Ștefănescu and Galleron, 2012; Jelinek and Pinkasz, 2014). Also a new wave of scholarship questions the structure of power relations and unequal flows that sustained the old cold war boxing games,

which confined the region to area studies (Chari and Verdery, 2009; Poenaru, 2011). Poignant analyses give voice to the disciplinary concern about the subordination of the CEE semi-peripheral knowledge production to the metropolitan agendas in anthropology (Pobłocki, 2009; Buchowski, 2012), feminist studies (Mizielinska and Kulpa, 2012), history (Dzenovska, 2013), sociology (Blagojević and Yair, 2010; Oleksiyenko, 2014) and economics (Schueth, 2011). The disciplinary analyses of the regimes of knowledge production have the great merit of making visible the link between the power struggles over the organization of post-1950s world system and the importance of CEE over defining the soul of capitalism in opposition to socialism and its successor, post-socialism.

In most of these accounts Eastern European scholars are no mere passive recipients. On the contrary, our complex agencies are fleshed out consistently. The constitution of the epistemic subjects and borders are made into an active domain of inquiry. Both Eyal and Bockman (Bockman and Eyal, 2002; Bockman, 2011) aptly show that neoliberal ideology, with its emphasis on competition, entrepreneurship and decentralization, is a global collective product in which the socialist East, as the ‘other’ of capitalism, was an important strategic site for testing globally developed ideas about the institutional arrangements needed for stimulating efficiency.

While I fully agree with this diagnostic, the exact mechanisms are not fully fleshed out. This paper further clarifies the agencies of CEE scholars and extends the analyses that describe how peripheries contribute to the asymmetries between the core and their academic hinterlands (Pobłocki, 2009; Medina, 2013; Oleksiyenko, 2014). To this end, I address the positioning games played by the CEE scholars, the modalities in which their various critical agendas became embedded in global fluxes of ideas, and their important role in co-producing the self-Orientalizing narrative on ‘socialism’ and ‘post-socialism’. My contention is that the various degrees of epistemic enclavisation of the region spring from the various types of disciplinary and theoretical global partnerships, which forge critical alliances predicated on attributing history to the West and excising the East from the ‘normal’ flow of history. For the Western scholar the impetus to create the partnership comes from the universalizing effect given to her by the critical agenda of embedding local struggles in metropolitan conversations. For the Eastern Scholar, the drive is to give weight to her critical contentions by showing that all the potentialities implied in the counterfactual of the scholarly account is already unfolding in other places. The West is most of the time the baseline of history; the East is populated by different laws and different ontological regimes. These types of global alliances are not specific to CEE. On the contrary, current criticism on postcolonial agenda (Chibber, 2014) or decolonial agenda (Bessire and Bond, 2014) reveal similar hidden partnerships in creating ontological areas operating under different ‘laws’, which escape global history, in need of different epistemic outlooks.

Beyond doubt, these critical alliances are unfolding in a highly unequal power field, where knowledge production gives Western and Eastern scholars asymmetrical powers to name. While these asymmetries gained attention in recent literature (Pobłocki, 2009; Blagojević and Yair, 2010; Thelen, 2011; Boatcă and Costa, 2012; Buchowski, 2012; Dzenovska, 2013; Oleksiyenko, 2014), the CEE ‘scholars’ critical agenda was left under-examined. Yet, many of these agendas and visions of the region have been critically engaged for their role in the local and global narratives instrumental in legitimizing CEE capitalism (Bockman and Eyal, 2002; Poenaru, 2011; Simionca, 2012). A counter-hegemonic epistemic counter-point can be formulated only by an investigation of our institutional and epistemological alliances, to make Gramscian reformulations and tactical shifts against the economic subsumption and metropolitan power games possible. Firstly, I address the issue of the colonial structure of knowledge production in CEE by reexamining a Thelen (2011; 2012) and Dunn and Verdery’s (2011) key debate over what is socialism and its posts. Secondly, I discuss the CEE ‘scholars’ agencies in the East-West transactions and some of the critical assumptions underpinning the narrative about socialism. In the third section I address two implicit aspects of post-socialism-as-an-operational-concept: when and where socialist modernity started – and I flesh out the implicit auto-colonial montage in some positions circulated as a response to these questions. I conclude by arguing for a more complex strategy of positioning in the face of hegemonic attempts to appropriate criticism.

The Western Critical Scholars

The access to defining the region is highly unequal and follows closely the contours of the global flows of capital. To quote Blagojević and Yair’s (2010: 350) statistics: “In 2006, for example, the ISI coded information from 1,768 social science journals. Of those, 95% were published in eight Western countries. The major English-speaking bloc, the USA, England, Canada, and Australia, accounts for 83.5% of all journals; the West European bloc, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and France, adds 11.3% of all ISI recorded journals.” To these we may add the highly skewed system of prestige around Western scientific conference and funding schemes (Blagojević and Yair, 2010; Oleksiyenko, 2014). As Buchowski (2012) rightly observes, the most circulated and cited edited volumes on post-socialism were edited by Western scholars, published at Western universities and comprised works by authors at Western Universities. Also, no ‘native’ theories from within the discipline of the authors were actually engaged. This is hardly news as self-reliance, structural blindness to other voices outside the very center, and metropolitan parochialism are well documented by the sociology of science (Medina, 2013; Oleksiyenko, 2014). These patterns are hard to argue with because the metropolitan knowledge production has the capitalist logic of self-fulfilling prophecies on its side. What is deemed universal and scientific are actually contextual and normalizing instruments that gain objectivity through their capacities of producing the world described (Steinmetz, 2005; Petrovici, 2010). What socialism and post-socialism are arguably falls under the same production scheme.

In a pivotal debate, Thelen (2011; 2012) addresses some of these issues in an effort to capture the colonial underpinnings of ‘socialism’ and ‘post-socialism’. Her thesis is that socialism and successor ‘posts’ did not escape the narrow parochialism of the metropolitan episteme, as Verdery’s (1996; 1999) and Dunn’s (2004) hallmark research show. Her proof lays in arguing that core academic parochialism emanates from its Orientalizing economicism. Thelen questions what came to be the bedrock of socialism as an operational concept: the shortage economy framework. The basics were laid down by economists, most notably by Kornai (Kornai, 1980; 1992), and were embraced by the whole social science field dealing with the CEE. Thelen argues that the neo-institutionalist formulation is to blame for creating the entity called ‘socialism’ as opposed to ‘capitalism’. Thelen holds that the multitude of everyday practices that constituted CEE societies were glossed over and boxed in a totalizing container by equating socialism with its peculiar economic system. Through such a move socialism became a mirror for capitalism. She writes: “highlighting the institutional ‘otherness’ of socialism renders invisible similarities in the production process” (2011: 47-48).

While I agree that the interdependencies, conversations, influences and resemblances are obscured if socialism is mirroring in opposition capitalism (see also Stark, 1986), I point to three problems: First, Thelen holds that the major problem of importing the neo-institutionalist framework is the fact that it equates CEE societies with their economies, and all formal and informal rules become isomorphic with those of the economic institutions. Her main accusation is that of economicism. Second, she contends that the imports from neo-institutionalism smuggles into anthropology a rational choice approach. Third, she puts the weight of economicism and rational choice on the shoulder of the Western scholar responsible for importing “Western economic theory” (2011: 48) into anthropology, with the (un)intended consequence of Orientalizing: socialism as the Other of capitalism. Kornai’s neoinstitutionalism is relegated by Thelen to a Western theory and “a dominant perspective on actors as maximizing individual utility” (2011: 44). In her view, the most important scholar guilty of such colonial imports is Katherine Verdery, but others, like Elizabeth C. Dunn are also responsible for recent reformulations of such theoretical positions. Dunn and Verdery (2011) took up the challenge of formulating a response.

Dunn and Verdery’s response to Thelen’s first imputation rightly points out that the relation of production, property and the nature of the firms are no illegitimate disciplinary import from economics. These are just a paradigmatic option, namely Marxist options. Their endeavor, as much as that of similar anthropological work, consisted exactly in unpacking the nature of property and labor relations in the particular regional power constellations, given the public ideological claims of a classless society. Far from being copycats of Kornai, Dunn’s and Verdery’s work, among others, aimed at understanding the nexus of power-culture in various spheres of the society, including economy.

Dunn and Verdery did not respond to Thelen’s second allegation. The charge of rational choice is indexed as part of the greater accusation of economicism and is not dealt with directly. It is packed as part of the point that the issue of property and

relations of production are part of the Marxist paradigm. Authors such as Kornai are not directly neo-institutionalists, at least in their first formulations, but Marxists.

Dunn and Verdery address the third charge by admitting that while Kornai became popular while teaching at Princeton, his major discoveries are due to his experience as a local, as an employee to the newspaper *Szabad Nép* and then as an employee of a Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy. While his arguments, like his 1992 magnum opus *The Socialist System* are indebted to the neoinstitutionalist framework and are formulated while based in a Western institution, he based them on local insights. Kornai is relegated here to the position of a very important informant, not to his rightful position of an intellectual participating in global debates.

Contrary to Thelen's dismissal of Kornai's indigenist perspective, then, his own experience was crucial to his understanding of socialist political economy. His early critique of it owes less to neoinstitutionalism than to a Marxist dialectical analysis, with Marx's terms reversed. Where Marx takes up the problem of surplus, Kornai takes up the problem of shortage; where Marx examines the constraints posed by demand, Kornai looks at the constraints of supply, and so on. Kornai's interactions with Western economists undoubtedly influenced his thinking (see Bockman and Eyal, 2002), and after 1989 he became an open advocate of neoliberalism – but this was after years of attempting to reform state socialism from within a more complex intellectual framework, which Thelen misrepresents. (Dunn and Verdery, 2011: 253)

While the response to the first criticism does justice to debates in anthropology and sociology, Dunn and Verdery's response to the second and third imputations, I argue, are actually symptomatic for the organization of the academic field and the East-West power/knowledge transactions. This is not to say that their response is inadequate, but rather that in this conversation both parties are obscuring and misrepresenting important structuring aspects of what holds together a complex colonial partnership. Dunn and Verdery's failure to respond to Thelen's accusations are reveal the structure of the partnership. The question is: what does it mean to engage a local scholar in western scholarship? And in this particular debate the answer has at least three dimensions.

First, the contribution of Bockman and Eyal (2002) is cited here in order to acknowledge the fact that Kornai was influenced by Western economics, yet these 'influences' are heavily understated. In Dunn and Verdery's formulations, it seems that Kornai's stakes were local, a conversation with fellow Marxists against the phony ideological Marxism of the nomenklatura. Yet, the very point of Bockman and Eyal's (2002) paper was to show that neoliberalism as a global ideology and its Eastern incarnation was no post-socialist accident, but had its roots in the global neoclassical debates of the 50s and 70s, where socialism played a major role as a laboratory for testing concepts and methods developed jointly by economists from the two sides of the Wall. As Bockman (2011)'s subsequent work eloquently shows, many neoliberal concepts and the trust in the magical powers of the self-regulating markets are rooted

in the left-wing criticism of the socialist state and economy. It is no mere accident that Kornai turned neoliberal.

Second, neo-institutionalism gained currency in the 1980s as a heterodox approach in economics and as backbone of contemporary new economic sociology and anthropology (Smelser and Swedberg, 2005; Hann and Hart, 2011). Neo-institutionalism shows that the rationality of the actors is bound by the choices available in a given context of enforced informal and formal rules, positing various organizations, like the firm or networks, at the center of the analysis. Kornai (1980; 1992) offered a thick network of concepts describing the various formal and informal rules which constrains the socialist firm and supply networks, redirecting the rational economic game towards a competition over supply, as opposed to the capitalist firm interested in competition over offer. This was in Kornai and latter translations into sociology a very important point of alliance in the global academic networks using the neo-institutionalist perspective. The bounded rational actors living in the socialist societies were producing irrational outcomes, given the formal and informal rules governing their collective behavioral games. Thelen on the one hand misses the very important point that Kornai uses a version of 'bounded' rationality, and Dunn and Verdery ignore the important strategic aspect of this neo-institutionalist approach, a key conceptual device used to forge global alliances beyond the initial Marxist interest in property and relation of production.

Third, Thelen's accusations of colonialism are harsh words to an anthropologist's ear. The colonial aspect of knowledge production is a central concern for anthropology as a discipline, especially for the metropolitan anthropologist part of the history of Western imperialism. Beginning with the 1980s this concern became the major epistemic vantage point from where anthropology recreated itself under the influence of poststructuralist and postcolonial knowledge/power nexus, thematized as *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Dunn and Verdery's response appropriates this tradition as a metropolitan guilt-relieving narrative. Kornai becomes an indigenous Hungarian scholar, and other local Hungarian, Romanian and Austrian scholars were mobilized as ingredients in Verdery's work. The purpose of this theoretical *mélange* was to use the local conceptual voice, and to analyse the local context through local concern, and local agendas.

After 1989, it is no surprise that anthropologists questioned these claims of radical distinction, interrogating the very terms of the Cold War *as set by people in socialist societies themselves*. [...] Why wouldn't Western anthropologists study these things? Since the goal was to study socialism and post-socialism, it made sense to study those elements that defined the parts of social life Eastern and Central Europeans had decided were at the heart of the problem. [...] Thelen attributes the noxious influence of neo-institutionalism in (post)socialist anthropology to the Hungarian economist Janos Kornai (1980). [...] She asserts that Verdery merely 'translates' Kornai, bringing his supposedly neo-institutionalist ideas into anthropology without modification. She seems to have missed Verdery's having combined Kornai with Konrád and Szelényi's (1979) Weberian approach and Pavel Campeanu's (1987) and Eric Wolf's (1982) Marxist analyses, among other influences. [...] The whole point of

creating separate ideal types of socialism and capitalism was to enable understanding socialism's operation *in its own terms*, rather than through the Cold-War prism that saw it as defective by capitalist standards. (Dunn and Verdery, 2011: 253-254)

To reiterate a point I have already made: all of these scholars cited as Verdery's influence are truly global scholars, part of transnational scholarly networks (Bockman, 2011). To take the 'local scholars' seriously does not mean to 'combine' them into a coherent theoretical framework. It means to engage with them, their critical agendas and their concepts, to point out their problematic political and theoretical alliances, as one does with her peers. In addition, taking 'local popular' concerns, agendas, and phantasms seriously means, as well, engaging them critically. People's phantasms may be utterly wrong, they might project utopian desires upon capitalism as a way to criticize socialism (Fehérváry, 2013), or they may become anti-communist as a way to criticize capitalism itself (Simionca, 2012), or anti-communism may be used to further neo-liberalism (Poenaru, 2011). The effect is a black boxed socialism opposed to capitalism. Neither Dunn's (2004), nor Verdery's (1996; 1999) work falls into such traps as they at least partly engage with local scholars and local popular concerns. But when it came to defend their work from accusations of colonialism, the writing culture metropolitan episteme was their language of choice – a highly positivist episteme, contrary to its initial intent (Rabinow et al., 2008), assuming that the local can be captured through observations, descriptions and giving voice to the indigenous concerns and visions (Comaroff, 2010). It is exactly through such epistemic vehicles that local critical agendas that are problematic remained unquestioned, have been globalized and became part of the knowledge/power alliances that once again shape the local context.

To wrap up, in this debate both positions are paradoxical. Thelen solicits to de-Orientalize socialism, yet no Oriental voice speaks as an agent in her account. Thelen attributes all agency of creating a strong theory of what-was-socialism to the Western Scholar, while ignoring and erasing the agency of the 'local' scholars in such theoretical endeavors. Kornai becomes in this account the Eastern émigré scholar intoxicated by Western theories, and gaining global preeminence through Western academia. Western scholars imported his economic theories into the anthropological field, operating once more an Orientalizing move. As a consequence, colonial charges for the Western scholar follow naturally. Thelen's narrative has the strange effect of wiping off Eastern European scholars' agencies completely and rendering them as mere victims of inconsiderate Western scholars. Kornai is transformed into a theoretical zombie bitten by the sharp Western neoinstitutionalist teeth and all the anthropology on CEE becomes infested by the colonial gaze. Also, what is only hinted at, but not fully developed is that the reverse of 'economicism' is 'culturalism'. It looks like a paradigmatic coup against Marxism in anthropology and a plea for a more 'culturalist' view (Hann and Hart, 2011) disguised as criticism against Western colonialism.² (Petrovici, 2012)

² Thelen exemplifies the colonial nature of economicism in anthropology through a section on the friendship factory networks, as instances of informal ties that structure the impersonal life of the socialist

Similarly paradoxical is the fact that while Dunn and Verdery gave voice to indigenous scholars and people, no Oriental agency is left after combining these voices into a choir. An important concern formulated by Thelen was that the 'otherness' of socialism and its 'posts' obscure important similarities in the production process. Yet Dunn and Verdery did not question their own agenda of still defending the game of mirroring oppositions between socialism and capitalism. On the contrary, this concern was dealt with by Dunn and Verdery in the metropolitan dominant episteme of 'writing culture', i.e., they used indigenous voices to make a theoretical synthesis and local popular voices to understand 'socialism's operation in its own terms'. Yet, with such a strategy the critical agenda of the engaged scholar disappears and is predicated on minimizing Eastern 'scholars' global alliances. Also, problematic local popular phantasms are minimized and only the heroic part of 'indigenous' resistance is made visible. The unintended effect of such epistemic underpinning is that the Eastern critical agendas are packed together and are further allowed to populate our knowledge/power world unexamined.

In this debate, the two opposing positions form a powerful partnership of precisely the types described by Bockman and Eyal (2002), whereby all agency is invested into one part of the scientific network, namely the Western part. The agreed upon point is that (academic) history is made in the West and the East is without history. This 'transfer of history' is made through, on the one hand, attributing all intentions, theories and major conceptual distinctions to the West, and, on the other hand, by the desire to give voice to the Eastern terra incognita, the land of unknown intellectuals and popular resistances. So let us pause briefly and look at how 'indigenous' voices frame their discontent and why the Western scholars alone are asked to bear the weight of agency and history.

The Eastern Critical Scholar

My contention is not that the operational concept of socialism, based on Kornai's shortage economy framework, is fraught with insidious neoliberalism. Rather, I want to highlight the fact that Kornai was not just an indigenous scholar, but an intellectual who formulated his theories on two different scales. At one level he was polemical with the local communist state. At another level he formed alliances with Western scholars in the effort to produce a global critical discourse against the state. It is the very interplay of these scalar levels that is central: Kornai's criticism of the socialist state was formulated within alliances with the scholars who did similar work against the capitalist state. Kornai was harnessing global fluxes of ideas located in the hegemonic center against the local state, while being an active part in the production of these

organizations. She argues that while similar processes have been reported in the Western organizations by [sic] neoinstitutionalist researchers like Granovetter (1995), the narrow *homo economicus paradigm* prevented similar analysis on Eastern organizations. She states that only a more theoretical attuned framework to the cultural aspects of the economic life could do justice to the multiplex work related ties. This description misrepresents the field, work related relations were very important aspects in Marxist analysis of relations of productions in the region (Burawoy and Krotov, 1992; Petrovici, 2012).

global fluxes. What is invisible in Thelen's, Verdery's and Dunn's accounts, is the implication of his double scalar critical stakes in the concept of socialism.

Kornai, as other scholars from CEE, formulated his theoretical frame in a conceptual language that is already in dialog with a homogenized Western modernity. In addition, his criticism of socialism was positioned in a 'different' East, an exteriority to the unfolding Western history. Yet, exactly this comparative move is imagined to make the right for the East to become part of 'normal' history, the Western one, possible. For Kornai the socialist state in the CEE region distorts the rationality of the inter-firm competition through lax budgets constraints, as opposed to the West, where hard budget constraints are in place. His critical contentions were constructing the region as an island, with different operating laws, removed from the 'baseline' of history, as unfolding in the West. Yet the hope was to reinscribe the region in a future 'normal history'. Eastern Europe becomes in such an account a place with a different temporality, and this is hardly a surprise. However, Kornai's theories are not just another instance of blunt colonial hegemony, where the subaltern is overwritten. He uses comparative inversion, as do many other scholars from CEE, as part of a more general critical strategy.

Fabian (1983) in his now classical *Time and the Other* warns against the *Western* colonial temporality that construes *the non-Western Rest* through the 'denial of coevalness' by means of Othering as *backward* or *primitive*. Or, in the critical reformulation proposed by the theorist of history Bevernage (2015), the West becomes the naturalized 'referential coevalness', the baseline of history from where all time lines are evaluated. A particular type of coevalness, one that is still responsible for Othering, emerges as the *non-Western Rest* and is recognized by the *West* to pertain to the same timeline, sharing the same past and making possible similar projected futures, yet the present is reserved only to the 'advanced' West. In this conceptual language, the above double scalar alliance, as illustrated by Kornai, works in two steps. Critical theory hopes to become agentic by showing how history may be made. The revealed exteriority of the East is just an invitation to become part of the history, the Western history, the major timeline where contemporary history flows with full force. Second, by making visible what keeps the CEE region outside the advanced history of the West, critical agendas imagine themselves to become possible hooks to cling to other actors for changing things. Or, at least, the fantasy is that some leverage point is gained: that of having an actual effect. *Referential coevalness* becomes the analytical/political hope for a better future. Ironically, this type of strategy has become increasingly an epistemological/political prescriptive strategy.

In a review of the debates of the epistemological literature that addresses the CEE Othering, Baer (2014) posits the politics of time as a major theme organizing various critical positions. She observes that there are two generations of theories. The first, starting in the mid-1990s, argues against the 'backwardness' of CEE theories (Lengyel, 1996; Wessely, 1996; Hamm, 2002; Lengyel, 2004). The second, starting with mid-2000s argues against the substitution of local theories with the 'advanced' global ones (Pobłocki, 2009; Blagojević and Yair, 2010; Buchowski, 2012; Mizielinska and Kulpa, 2012; Oleksiyenko, 2014). In Fabian and Baverange's terminology, the positions against the Othering of CEE are formulated as strategies of opposing false recognitions and assimilations on the same timeline with the West. More blatantly,

these theories prescribe an epistemic strategy *against referential coevalness*. Ironically, both generations use the double scalar move and transform Kornai's type of political-epistemic strategy into a normative and regulative standpoint: first, the processes and theories from the region that model them are posited as different from Western ones; second, this makes possible a shared future with the advanced West. Let us examine both of these epistemic strategies briefly.

The first generation of theories responded against the allegation of 'underdeveloped' CEE theories and the need to 'catch up with the West' by arguing that Eastern Europe has particular ways of conceptualizing phenomena and, therefore, locally related theories (Blagojević and Yair, 2010: 344; Baer, 2014). Probably the most succinct formulation of these ideas was given by the influential debate from the mid 1990s in the Hungarian journal *Replika* (Hadas, 1996; Lengyel, 1996; Wessely, 1996). Just take Lengyel's (1996; 2004) contention that the CEE knowledge production's specificity rests on its social *problem solving orientation*, while Western knowledge production is *paradigmatically orientated*³. The first type of knowledge is the result of the constant recruitment of the CEE scientist into policy based research projects, while the second type of knowledge is the result of sound and fundamental research programs. I certainly understand the critical intentions of this distinction, the specific academic Hungarian conjunction in which it was formulated, and that it may have captured some real tensions relevant for the larger CEE context (Petrovici, 2010). During socialism, in Hungary most of the institutionalization of social sciences was done by the state through the Academy of Sciences and a dense network of research institutes. These institutes were mostly responding to the knowledge requirements of the planning apparatus and reformist nomenklatura. The universities played a much lesser role in the actual knowledge production (Némedi, 2010). Yet criticizing this distinction in this specific institutional conjunction is self-Orientalizing. Giving weight to a critical conceptual distinction by placing Eastern Europe in another regime of knowledge/power as opposed to the 'normal' West has to be confronted as such: a problematic phantasm. It misrepresents Western scholarship as value-free, neutral, free from power games, interested in producing real knowledge in a very static environment, which rarely recruits scientists in putting forward reform agendas in favor of capital or against capital. In addition, criticism framed like this misrepresents Eastern scholarship as captured by the state and businesses, instrumental for policy, without some serious internal censorship about what is true or false. Conversely, the Eastern scholar becomes organically linked to her political milieu. Such distinction may very well offer the chance to any interested third party to legitimize institutional reforms mimicking the 'proper' Western academic institutions and market-like organizations in order to stimulate a more competitive science in the East⁴. Also, it has

³ Hadas (1996) and Wessely (1996) make similar contentions about the specificity of the CEE regime of knowledge, the importance of the political stakes and the poetical character of the intellectual endeavors.

⁴ Lengyel (2004) almost makes this step himself when talking of the fate of the socialist research institutes: "While marketing firms do applied research in the narrow sense, the research institutes of ministries could function more as think tanks - although they hardly ever did so" (2004: 153). He argues that the research institutes could have been excellent "think tanks". It is not very clear in what way he uses this label, but we have to give him credit that he refers to its classical meaning, i.e., organizations that

the potential to attract those third parties with a neoliberal agenda of academic marketization in the West by putting the university on its 'right track' of problem-oriented science, like in the 'experimenting' East. However, regardless of the shortcomings of these various positions, the debate signaled the necessity to look at the peripheral knowledge production and the local disciplinary histories.

In the second generation of theories that debate the colonial character of knowledge production in CEE the argument was switched from the necessity to appropriate the local disciplinary past to putting it into global debates. Nonetheless, this strategy is far from breaking with any referential coevalness. In the concise comment of Baer (2014: 27): "the 'struggle' against intellectual 'discontinuity' Pobłocki (2009: 239) – meant as a quest for one's own ancestors as a means to provide an alternative to the theoretical mimicking of Anglophone anthropology – ends up emphasizing a favouring of the past as the prism to apprehend the present and, more importantly, «the West» as the basic category of reference". Take for example, Blagojević and Yair's (2010) very perceptive analysis of the colonial nature of the sociological knowledge production and the highly unequal chances for publication and prestige building for the CEE scholars. The whole tension of the paper is constructed, in a sophisticated reevaluation and appropriation of the 1996 *Replika* debate, on the observation that CEE is almost like a living social laboratory given the frequent changes that permit the formulation of precise observation over the causes and processes at work in various phenomena. Yet, publishing in an academia strongly dominated by American and Western European universities often means taking up the parochial metropolitan parlance. Unfortunately, as Blagojević and Yair argue, this self-taming paves the road to irrelevance. I find an epistemic position that plays the card of the (radical) disjunction in the production of the semi-peripheral spaces very unproductive compared to the core capitalist spaces. Core capitalist spaces are also living laboratories, especially under the neoliberal capitalist free markets and diminishing welfare provisions. The glorious postwar thirty years of the 20th century are long gone. Life is prone to changes and massive instabilities both in the East and West. While I sympathize with the critical intent of Blagojević and Yair, no greater critical leverage is actually obtained by arguing for 'difference'.

Criticism and subversion of Othering, argues Bevernage (2015), is always a complex Gramscian game against hegemonizing coevalness by the capitalist centre. Negating coevalness, as a fight for a different past and present, may be a political strategy to formulate a counter-hegemonic future. The new generations of critical epistemologies on CEE are acknowledging the necessity for a different past and the struggle for intellectual continuities, yet it puts coevalness in highly problematic terms of a common future.

Today's neoliberal arrangements can be seen as multifarious ways in which capitalist accumulation tried to use and capture the hopes for the future by integrating into new organizational arrangements criticisms against bureaucracy and autocracy on the shop floor, pervasive commodification and enclosures, patriarchy, and conjugal

simultaneously perform both research and advocacy for particular type of social policy linked with the private sector, most of the time sustained by market forces to further a particular agenda.

family (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). The amphibian character of neoliberalism as policy packages of privatization, marketization and financialization, and its incredible polymorphous tactics (Peck and Theodore, 2012) can be linked exactly to the ability to capture and use popular projects about the future, moral ideas and practices, criticism and local discontent. As aptly shown by Simionca (2012) in CEE the criticism of the Taylorist type of production, controlling bureaucracies, on the one hand, and the ethics of popular entrepreneurship and striving towards independence, on the other hand, were all captured by the anti-communist discourse and blended together, paradoxically, to legitimize neoliberalism. Contemporary popular and high culture concepts of socialism and post-socialism are floating signifiers operating exactly in such a regime of meaning (Poenaru, 2011). Yet, this observation points to the need to place epistemology and knowledge production within their ontological milieu.

After reviewing the solutions of the two generations of theories on Othering knowledge practices of CEE, Baer (2014) argues that the only way to avoid reproducing the existing hierarchies of knowledge is to take the radical potential of social sciences further, in particular in anthropology, and apply it to the very production of knowledge. The anthropology of anthropology may offer the chance to understand the production of the contemporary (Rabinow *et al.*, 2008) and comprehend the disciplinary practices as part of the wider world. While I find this proposal refreshing, it still seems that it places the politics of time outside politics at large. Time, as such, is hardly a substance that exceeds various societies. Yet, this point alerts us to the fact that there are no *a priori* possibilities in constructing a politics of time for or against coevalness detached from the materiality of the power flows. On the contrary, given the complex political economy of the capital accumulation games and processes of class formation and decomposition of any epistemic strategy has to take into account the production of time and space. Our nodal epistemological concepts and the politics of method cannot avoid the scrutiny of our hopes and critical endeavors highly linked with everyday emotionalities and livelihood that give consistency to seemingly inescapable ontologies.

Where and when does history begin?

To further develop this point, I trace the particular turning points in the referential coevalness of a homogenized West. I then examine possible alternatives by focusing on a different ontological framework that takes into account the political economy of accumulation and class formation. That means a change from meta-theoretical considerations to the actual theory. This change offers the chance to better differentiate between two regimes of meaning for 'knowledge alliance'. One concerns the *institutional* aspects of shared organizations, boards, journals, and projects by scholars across political and economic formations. The other the *epistemic* aspects, in terms of concepts, theories and research objects commonly engaged by scholars across space. From the possible candidates I focus on urbanization. Take for example Buchowski's (2012) charge that beginning with the 1980s, Eastern European scholars in the field of anthropology are relegated to the status of ethnologist by their Western colleagues, while social sciences in general are predicated on their interest in the

urban. 'Metropolitan anthropologists' research interest shifted from peasants to urban populations and industrial settings while Eastern ethnologists remained loyal to villagers." (2012: 24). Modernity, socialism and postsocialist capitalism are deemed to be an urban phenomenon. A subtle devaluation of what is deemed disciplinary was done by a change in the focus of the field on the urban.

This is somehow ironic given that CEE played a central role in the *New Urban Sociology* of the 1970s and 1980s (Sassen, 2000; Milicevic, 2001). The *New Urban Sociology* is probably one of the most radical movements in social science that emerged in the 1970s bringing together scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds, interested in the urban unrest of the 1960s and the post-1970s wave of capital globalization (Hutchison *et al.*, 2015). These scholars were unique in their theoretical endeavor of reengaging with Marx, Weber, Trotsky and Lenin and had a lasting impact on the social sciences, being responsible for the 'spatial turn' of the 1990s (Sassen, 2000; Hutchison *et al.*, 2015). If we follow the institutional alliances, the very process of the institutionalization of this theoretical movement started in Varna, Bulgaria where the conference of the *International Sociological Association* (ISA) was held in 1970 and had as its first chair, for the newly proposed research committee on regional and urban planning, a Polish sociologist, Janusz Ziółkowski, one of the future activists in the *Solidarność* movement (Milicevic, 2001). The new committee was a joint project of Western and Eastern European scholars, with CEE academics forming the bulk of it, and aimed at opening critical debates about social inequalities by mainstreaming the issue of space. The Statement proposal of what was to become the *ISA Research Committee 21 on Regional and Urban Development* was put forward at a meeting in Budapest, Hungary, in 1972, and was a bold argument about the crisis of sociology given its subordination to the planning and legitimizing needs of the managerial and ruling classes⁵. In 1974 the British sociologist Ray Pahl became the chair of the committee, marking also a change in composition; the Western Scholars became demographically dominant and held, from then on, most of the steering positions. Pahl was elected chair given his practice in state planning and his theoretical contribution on urban managerialism, a shared interest with most of the CEE scholars involved in or studying centralized regional planning (Milicevic, 2001).

The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (IJURR) of the *ISA RC21*, became a major beacon of the *New Urban Sociology* movement, and, despite the major shift in composition of the committee, it retained the original focus on planning⁶. Exactly in the pages of this journal, in the global East-West transactions, the 'under-urbanization' thesis formulated by Iván Szelényi (Murray and Szelényi, 1984) gained major academic coverage, along other regular contributions on the socialist city (Milicevic, 2001). In CEE there were many narratives and various contending critical agendas on the urban-rural exchanges and the processes of urbanization. However,

⁵ The document was signed by Rainer Mackensen (FRG), Enzo Mingione (Italy), Jiri Musil (Czechoslovakia), Ray Pahl (UK) and Iván Szelényi (Hungary) (see, Milicevic, 2001)

⁶ In its 1977 scope and perspective statement IJURR announced that it "would focus more on the critical analysis of ideologies of planning, trying to make the system of conflicting interests in urban and regional development transparent, to demonstrate the social and class interests behind the different forms and strategies of planning and state intervention" (Milicevic, 2001: 772).

Szelényi's thesis became central since it addressed explicitly the greater CEE rural population contingencies relative to the urban ones and it was formulated in the major outlet of the *New Urban Sociology* movement in comparative terms with capitalist urban spaces (Bodnar, 2001).

Given the centrality of CEE scholars in the institutionalization of the *New Urban Sociology* and their centrality in formulating the theoretical focus of the movement, Buchowski's (2012) cry on the colonial effects of reorienting the research on the urban seems almost ridiculous. However, this unease disappears when considering that much of the implicit epistemic CEE spatial silencing is rooted in the particular interplay of what is deemed consequential, strategic, far reaching processes of the modern or its converse, non-modern. That is, a clearer image can be drawn if the *epistemic alliances* are taken into account formulated within the *institutional alliances*, which became gradually skewed towards the West. Ironically, at the epistemic level, in much of the critical agenda of Eastern critical history also starts with modernity and its major instantiation: the urban. Conversely, much of the conceptualization of what happened in the village done by Eastern scholars themselves is already formulated in a dialogue with Western scholarship in an already self-Orientalizing montage. Let us follow the issue of modernity in the socialist and postsocialist urban/rural divide and the 'under-urbanization thesis' briefly. This illustrates how epistemic enclavization is produced when emptying the region of history and attributing it to the West.

To put it in Szelényi's (1996) reappraisal, in an edited volume on the CEE cities published in an IJURR book series: in the socialist East "the growth of urban industrial jobs seems to have been much faster than the growth of the permanent urban population" (1996: 292). The proletarianization processes produced cities where urbanization lags behind the industrialization processes. The term is coined in contrast to the 'overurbanization' of the peripheries and the 'regular' urbanization of the core capitalist countries. The naming of the process is indicative in that this is a piece of an auto-colonial discourse that postulates the 'Western capitalist path' is the 'normal' path. That is also obvious from the fact that the commuter and the urban villager are proxies for the supposedly failed modernity of the socialist city. The commuter, as a 'double dweller' of city and village, instead was the actor who simultaneously exploited the resources of the factory and of the household farm. The 'urban villager' was the urbanite strongly dependent on informal exchanges with the village, through the extended family or informal ties in these narratives. These putatively failed modern actors stand for greater systemic failures.

The critical intent behind such a formulation was that socialist accumulation was predicated on under-investment in agriculture, the need for extensive land exploitation and large amounts of raw labor. Only by treating the peasant labor with dignity would a real modernization actually become possible. The 'under-urbanization' is a triple effect: the need to control the expansion of cities in order to prevent shrinkage of available land for agriculture; the need to redirect investment resources toward manufacturing in industry and to avoid 'unproductive' investments in infrastructure; and finally, the need to control the possible dangerous concentration of urbanites of the dictatorial state. However, the undertone of this narrative is that the modernity run by the socialist state is a partial modernity, a mock modernity of an

industrial economy constrained by the systemic need of a primary sector, which is impossible to be superseded.

As Bodnar (2001) rightly argues, the whole issue has to be put into an alternative frame to avoid the auto-colonial ‘montage of the socialist city’. Her solution is to read the socialist economy as a strategy of a developmentalist state in the periphery of the capitalist world system, with fair success in renegotiating a semi-peripheral position. The effect of this change of perspective is that ‘under-urbanization’ permits the qualification of “the greater retentive force of agriculture and the thereby emerging combined income-earning strategies that have historically accompanied east-central European industrialization” (2001: 28).

This alternative reading proposed by Bodnar can be taken further and directed towards different institutional and epistemic alliances with voices from below. Feminist autonomists (Dalla Costa, 2012), third worldist (Quijano, 2000) and their contemporary various heirs in anthropology (Kasmir and Carbonella, 2014; Carrier and Kalb, 2015) have already argued that minimizing the cost of wages, through speculating on partial monetization of the means of subsistence and unpaid reproduction costs, sits at the core of the capitalist accumulation processes. The retentive force of agriculture is a response to the accumulation imperative to minimize the cost of reproduction of the labor force (Troc, 2012; Petrovici, 2013). The process of enclosure of land and available spatialized resources is a major instrument which uproots populations, producing a proletariat in need for wage. It was the classical path of the English industrial revolution and one of the major instruments of accumulation through dispossession and class decomposition in the peripheries (Kasmir and Carbonella, 2014). The actually-existing-socialism urbanized some of the reproduction costs to minimize their wage costs on the local level and used the unpaid reproduction labor of the rural household simultaneously. Moreover, the combined income-strategy did not lose its actuality and hardly can be relegated to a failed modernity. Today it is played out by the very iconic figures of modernity, multinationals who relocate their production facilities in suburban and rural areas in Eastern Europe (Petrovici, 2013). Partial urbanization becomes a means to a legitimate end: to profit from low wages of populations with rural households or the cheap products of this households used by multinational’s employees.

History existed all along in the Eastern Europe village and the industrializing city. The production of the peasant and partial proletarianization of the urbanite was as ‘modern’ as the socialist bureaucracy and predates, in the region, socialism (Boatcă, 2003; Wallerstein, 2011). But more importantly, it is underpinned by parallel processes at work also in the purported ‘cradle’ of modernity, the Western city. Unpaid labor and partial monetization of the labor runs through all the history of capital accumulation. In Szelényi’s formulation and subsequent use the critical intent is finely engrained in the proposed concepts. But, once again the weight of criticism comes from taking out CEE of the flux of the history and putting the region on another track. Unfortunately, this type of framing criticism is still here. In many current narratives, the socialist space enters history, de facto, through its insertion in the capitalist dynamism, global influences, post-Fordist inequalities, and Western imported institutional frameworks that foster and compel the region to compete

(Sýkora and Bouzarovski, 2012). The post-socialist cities are central in this reinscription of history.

Most of the current debates are organized around opposing the socialist city to the post-socialist city and often posit a radical discontinuity between the two (Sýkora and Bouzarovski, 2012). In spite of the fact that the analysis ultimately pushes scholars to argue that “CEE cities are more European than socialist” (Bertaud, 2006: 91), the general framework within which urban phenomena are addressed claims that “the most pervasive effect on the structure of socialist cities was the absence of real estate markets” (Bertaud, 2006: 91), plus the chaotic administrative control over specific land uses through planning. Therefore, in this framework, the post-socialist allocation of land use through competitive markets marks a radical transformation, a restructuring of the socialist city. This narrative obscures the lines of continuity in the region and silences other types of discontinuity beyond a facile opposition. In such stories, actually existing socialism turns into the evil ‘other’ of capitalism. We are led to believe that socialism means chaotic planning in the absence of reliable information, administrative immobility, cumbersome bureaucratic coordination, and spatial homogenization policies. With such a ludicrous ‘brother’ capitalism is easily equated with market coordination without the need for perfect information, spatial dynamism, speed of transformations, strong competition that favors the tendency towards supply/demand equilibrium, spatial fragmentation and heterogeneity. The former socialist subjects are relevant in the postsocialist ‘capitalism’ only as bearers of “some strong socialist values and working class identities clashing with the entrepreneurial spirit of capitalism” (Baločkaitė, 2010: 65).

To get back to Buchowski’s (2012), we need to supplement the criticism of the colonial effect of the disciplinary East-West division of labor with a more precise mechanism that capture also the agency of the Eastern scholar and their alliances, since highly critical concepts and agendas are put together and formulated in self-Orientalizing concepts exactly by the Eastern scholars. Giving weight to criticism by relegating CEE to an ‘alternative modernity’ to make possible a bright future turns invisible that producing hope and capturing criticism is how capital accumulation works. On the contrary, an attention to the politics of time and space suggests an ontology where the global power games and the local forces are interconnected. In order to avoid Epistemic enclavisation of the region may be avoided through an ongoing search for alternative alliances from below and counter-hegemonic repositioning.

Conclusion

The analytical work done on Central and Eastern Europe by the double work of putting socialism into a mirrored opposition with capitalism and putting socialism into a mirrored opposition with postsocialism, have transformed the region into an island with seemingly different social processes. I have argued in this paper that these narratives were coproduced in partnership by Eastern and Western Scholars. The strongly asymmetrical networks that unfolded in these partnership are molded after the global capital fluxes, giving Western scholars access to an academic infrastructure

where naming is still a privilege that emanates from the core. Critical scholars have pointed out the epistemic parochialism of the self-relying metropolitan core and the asymmetry in terms of disciplinary recognition that emanates from this self-centeredness. I pointed to the fact that such descriptions are not precise enough since the complex agencies of the Eastern scholars and the specificities of their theoretical alliances are not fleshed out. Following the debate opened by Thelen (2011; 2012) and Dunn and Verdery (2011) I made visible the implicit meta-theoretical assumption pertaining to both positions and the games of placing agency in order to make productive recruitments possible and build academic networks. I further followed the modality through which Eastern scholars framed their critical theories in which they make visible the contrafactuals that would transform the region for the better. CEE is portrayed in these critical agendas as a place not yet on the right track of history, as its Western counterpart. Through strategic institutional and epistemic alliances, some of the CEE scholars rescaled themselves exactly by making visible to other scholars from outside the region in what way CEE is a strategic illustration of the metropolitan agenda. CEE became an epistemic oasis in the global partnership between the critical Eastern scholars claiming the right to history and the Western scholars incorporating their distinctions in the metropolitan critical agendas.

However, such types of framing are easily captured in the power games that come with the geographies of dispossession and accumulation. CEE is not the only region that was boxed in an ontological straightjacket with different rules of composition. Instead, it is part of a larger process of creating epistemic borders by creating different ontological textures across the globe (Bessire and Bond, 2014; Chibber, 2014). Therefore subversion and critical theory is always a complex Gramscian game of tactical shifts, of creating new alliances, of reformulating in order to make possible new strategic positions. CEE did not escape the global networks of scholarship with its colonial gaze of fixing the debates about the region in the juxtaposition of indigenous-metropolitan. More precisely, much of the underpinnings of socialism and its posts were constructed in conversation with the West through comparisons, inscribing this methodology in politics of time where the future is imagined as the convergence point between the West and the East. Capitalist 'normality' becomes a fantasy instituted exactly through the game of inversion, putting the East as an inverted West. Restoring the future may just seem to be possible by supplementing the present with what it lacks. Engaging the production of the contemporary more vigorously has the potential of reconfiguring our epistemologies about the region by looking on the political economy of space and time production. In this paper I illustrated this approach by following the particularities of a concrete example, that of the under-urbanization. Given its epistemic consequences for the region, I have flashed out a different analytical strategy along these lines, in which alliances with the dominated are formed and searched from below.

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