

# “We have no *postcolonial theory* as such, but only different *imperial experiences*”. A Conversation with Alexander Etkind on the Imperial Experience of Russia in Global Perspective

Edited by Mikhail Minakov

◇ eSamizdat 2021 (XIV), pp. 185-190 ◇

THIS interview is based on the conversation between Alexander Etkind and Mikhail Minakov and is dedicated to the cultural situation in post-Soviet societies. It was conducted when Alexander Etkind was a Professor of History at the European University Institute at Florence, where he moved after many years of teaching at the University of Cambridge. Etkind has recently published several books in which he reviewed issues of post-Soviet culture through the lens of colonial theory, e.g. in *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Polity Press 2011); *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford University Press 2013); and most recently, *Nature's Evil: A Cultural History of Natural Resources* (Polity 2021). Alexander Etkind and Mikhail Minakov were also editors of *Ideology After Union. Political Doctrines, Discourses, and Debates in Post-Soviet Societies* (ibidem-Verlag 2020). Mikhail Minakov is Senior Advisor at the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute, Editor-in-chief of the peer-reviewed *Ideology and Politics Journal*, and a philosopher working in the areas of political philosophy, social theory, post-communist development, and history of modernity.

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**Mikhail Minakov** *Good morning. Alexander. First, I'd like to ask you, how can post-colonial theory – including your concept of internal colonization – be applied in order to understand the internal processes of post-Soviet societies?*

**Alexander Etkind** Mikhail, this is a very broad and complex question. Why is it so complex? Because there is no theory of colonialism, or as they like to say now, of ‘decolonization’, or just ‘post-colonial theory’ in general. No such theory exists. There are some concepts, well-developed by historical practice, such as empire or colony. There are also ideological terms, which I prefer to call ‘-isms’.

For example, colonialism is an ideology that blesses colonization; alternatively, this term is often used for criticising this kind of ideology. Or take postcolonialism: is there any reasonable way to apply this concept to Russia, which is still imperial? Colonization is a massive part of political practices, and it has taken place for many centuries, starting from ancient Athens to the Republic of Venice to the British Empire, etc. We could argue that the last of these formal empires was the Soviet Union – it collapsed well after the British Empire. But there are some scholars arguing that the European Union can also be considered an empire, or the USA with its conquests (we have seen in the past few days the result of such practices, when the American troops withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021). And of course the Russian Federation is still a place where various peoples suffer exploitation and discrimination, as was the case in formal empires. There is no underlying theory of colonization, in the strict sense of the word (I really appreciate those rare moments when the humanities formulate a theory). Theory does not exist, but the subject does – and it is vast and diverse.

**M.M.** *Then what would you call this subject? Inequality?*

**A.E.** Well, no. Inequality is a broader concept than we need. Rather, I would call it the colonial politics of the empires, and how it has changed in history. Some scholars posit that there were empires without colonies, but I do not agree: if there is an empire, there must be colonies, and vice versa. How did it

define itself as an empire, what distinguished it from other types of state entities? The subject is precisely the historical changes that occurred in the relations between the imperial centres and their colonial domains. In what ways was the republic of Venice different from ancient Rome? In what ways did the Soviet Union differ from the British Empire, or from the much closer Austria-Hungarian Empire? To what extent do terrestrial empires differ from maritime empires? How did all this change over time?

**M.M.** *All right, so let's consider the Soviet Union. What is the connection between colonialism and the anti-colonial movements?*

**A.E.** The Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics. One of them was the Russian Federation with the capital in Moscow. The other 14 republics were, in my opinion, colonies of the Soviet Union, in different forms and shapes and to different degrees. Moreover, I suggest that even the Russian Federation was a colony of the Soviet Union, in the same way as Cisleithania (Austrian crown lands) was a colony of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. In both empires, their capitals – Moscow and Vienna with adjacent territories – constituted their metropolitan areas. They were the centres and sources of political power, the only beneficiaries of colonial exploitation and the only benchmarks of cultural difference. They constituted the exceptions, rather than the norms, of their imperial regimes. This is what I call an *imperial alibi*. From the metropolitan centres, the imperial triad of political power, economic exploitation and cultural distancing spread all over the imperial space – to the East and West, North and South. In my book *Internal Colonization: The Imperial Experience of Russia*, I have described the historical *experience* of one empire compared to the others against which Russia competed or battled. In another book, *Nature's Evil: A Cultural History of Natural Resources*, I have looked at the same problems from a global, trans-imperial perspective. But I did not draw any conclusions about the relationship between the Russian Empire and the post-revolutionary Soviet Union. Volumes have been written about its colo-

nial structure. Its increasing reliance on natural resources such as oil, its centralization of power, tolerance to tremendous geographical inequalities and welcoming of cultural differences are all very conspicuous. With regard to the USSR, these imperial concepts are of course valid, but they might not be specific enough. Considering the imperial structure of the Soviet Union or the colonial nature of its parts, such as Ukraine, we need other concepts to help us understand this ubiquitous label of ‘colony’; an example from my books, for instance, is ‘reversed assimilation’, or the concepts of internal colonization, resource-dependency, etc.

**M.M.** *I remember the discussions with some colleagues in Kiev and Minsk about your concept of ‘internal colonization’. In the eyes of nationally-oriented scholars, this concept even looked like a sort of justification for Russians, which – since Russia was also a kind of colony of Moscow – seems to undermine the anti-colonial pathos of the liberation movements in Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia. Do you agree?*

**A.E.** No, not at all. Russia is not the only country where internal colonization is practiced as the main political-economic mechanism. Think about Italy with its huge (and very important for the history of political thought) difference between the North and the South; about the UK (where the concept of internal colonization was first formulated by the Welsh scholar); about Austria-Hungary with its Hungarian, Slavic, Tirol and other colonies; about contemporary China with its Uyghur problem, etc. What you are talking about sounds like a competition of grievances: my trouble is the biggest because it is mine, so please do not talk about your trouble at all.

**M.M.** *For me, talking about colonialism means talking about a political system in which citizens – or political subjects – from the very beginning are not equal (depending on where they live, or on their belonging to a specific community). In this perspective, the suitable theoretical framework is that of centre/periphery. It has*

*some advantages: there are no derogatory terms like koloniia, nor ideologically charged ones like imperiia – there is too much in this one word. Nevertheless, when it comes to looking at post-colonialism, it seems like an attempt to build a state, a political system, or a legal system outside of this inequality between the metropolis and the periphery. It is very ideologically and morally solid, it has integrity. It gives us something that allows us to build a republic differently. But when we return to the internal colonization, it turns out that any national or regional centre immediately acquires the mystical power of an imperial centre. Isn't that so?*

**A.E.** First, this idea of the centre can be misleading for our understanding of space: in fact, in some empires – the Russian one is the best example, but British is also good – the political center was on the geographical periphery. Where do the economic conditions for political domination come from? Most likely from natural resources, which can be right next to the capital but – this is how it worked – usually were very distant. Another equally non-spatial condition is the cultural difference, which is actively supported – in fact, constructed – by the imperial centre. In a colonial situation, the imperial people – state employees, priests, missionaries, theologians – assert that the colonial peoples are naturally and inherently different. They have a different character, capabilities, language, beliefs and much more – in comparison with what we have here in the centre. This is close to racism, and it is often – but not always – connected with skin colour. For example, in Russia white people were predominant both in the metropolises and in the colonies. Racial markers of colonial difference helped the naval empires shape their power: the subalterns had another skin colour, which for a racist also meant another character, religion, etc. Because they were different, it was acceptable to deprive them of certain rights which we now call 'human rights', while asserting the individual rights among the people of the metropolitan race. But in Russia, almost everyone was and is white, even though many spoke and speak different lan-

guages, or practice different religions. And all this became an important factor of colonial difference. In any modern society, everyone is equal before the law. But in the Russian Empire, there were social classes (*estates, sosloviia*) established by imperial law. In contrast, in the British Empire or even in the American South, the racial privileges or discriminations were mostly a matter of practice and were not defined by law. People of a certain social class paid the taxes, people from another class didn't have to; people from a certain class had to serve in the army, others didn't have to; some people could go to university, others couldn't. But, despite these differences, they were all white, and many spoke Russian and were orthodox. But the ethnic or, sometimes, racial Others (*inorodtsy*) – the Yakuts, the Uzbeks, even the Cossacks – did not have this class system, which was designed primarily for those who were ethnically Russian. This is a paradox. It is intriguing that, while there are no Russian historians who do not know about the class (estate) system, there is no one investigating the colonial nature of this internal construction. In a race-based society, you see a man, you have an idea of what class he belongs to, and you act accordingly; but if everyone is white, the difference needs to be written in the law. In my *Internal Colonization* I talk about Peter I: while establishing the Russian Empire and founding its new capital, he decreed by written law that all noblemen cut their beards, while the peasants and the clergy kept theirs. This had precisely the function of race: you see a man and immediately know his status...

**M.M.** *Let's talk about some post-Soviet issues. We are speaking about the same time of the year when the Soviet Union's collapse started 30 years ago. Fifteen recognised republics – along with four unrecognised – arose. Towards the end of 1994, these post-Soviet republics, born during the collapse of the Soviet Union, had already learned to fight secessionism and separatism. In Russia, the war against Chechnya began. Ukraine had to manage the Crimean separatism, in Latvia separatist movements in the*

*eastern provinces appeared, and the national elite found themselves at the centre. New questions arose: were new forms of colonialism born in 1994-1995? Did the 'national' republics – states based on the idea of the emancipation of a singular nation – contest the division between the metropolis and their internal colonies?*

**A.E.** Well, if we talk about ideal-typical categories – since here we are closer to ideology than scholarship – we can say that nation-states did indeed rise up from the ruins of the Soviet empire, as they had some seventy years earlier, from the ruins of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. But of course a nation-state is also a particular political construction. In such a state, all people are equal in the eyes of the law, everyone has access to the same education system (so that, theoretically, everyone will be equally educated), and this means that in this liberal world all people compete equally for success and self-actualization in life. But of course, there is always, inevitably, some tension between a nation-state and the ethnic minorities within its borders. Sometimes, this tension has had to be regulated by international (rather than national) law. Sometimes, it has resulted in genocide.

**M.M.** *These idealised nation-states did not really develop in the post-Soviet space.*

**A.E.** True, they did not. A successful life still depends on one's origins. Where does a man come from? From Wales or from London?

**M.M.** *From Moscow or Grozny?*

**A.E.** Indeed. But in this case, things are more complicated. The Russian Federation never pretended to be a nation-state, unlike present-day Ukraine. But Great Britain, France or Austria did turn into nation-states. However, many problems persist, whether one sees them as legacies of the former empires or the newly-developed features of late capitalism. There are significant differences between Scotland and southern England, and this is why Scotland makes attempts to secede from the

UK. Many Scots see the contemporary UK as a new sort of the British Empire. Others deny it, and we know very well how these debates in the post-Soviet space go.

**M.M.** *For me, when we talk about post-Soviet states, their liberal-democratic façades are still oriented towards the ideals of 1991: national emancipation, democracy, ideological pluralism, human rights and constitutions written at the beginning of the 1990s, were all inspired by those liberal-democratic impulses. But shadow states emerged, built on mafia structures, neo-feudalist or neo-patrimonial foundations, or clan groups. They threaten each other until one state gives in, or until an authoritarian system is put into place. In Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan this clan-based pyramid still persists despite all changes; in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the fight of these clans continues, but fragile institutions are trying to establish a republic or more generally a state, and the conflicts between these two sides create a complex political culture. And even in these three complex entities, colonial problems still arise. The local elites launch separatist movements, secessionist movements, anti-colonial movements and, now more and more frequently, de-coloniality movements, often defined by those ideologists who are trying to create specific rights for a national majority or minorities. In all these cases, the question of colonialism is idealized. Why? Where does it come from? We could even talk about the collective unconsciousness, but the idea that there is a colony, that there is colonialism, will still be the focus of public discussions.*

**A.E.** If we talk about the Russian Federation, in its administrative and juridical foundations and ultimately in its Constitution, it is more imperial now than even the old Lenin-Bukharin Constitutions of the Soviet Union were. In those constitutions, the national republics had the right to self-determination up to secession. In the case of the Russian Federation, its Constitution recog-

nizes ethnical and administrative pluralism of federation. Many ask, why not 'equalize' Tatarstan with other federal lands? – although in practice, they are truly almost equal, and their differences are largely symbolic! But this is far from the right to self-determination or secession. The history of the Chechnya wars demonstrates the terrible consequences of this practical absence of federalism, both for the colony and the metropolis. This is why I like the federal concepts at the base of the European Union, or the federalist philosophy upon which the USA was founded. Again, the idea of a Federation, Confederation or Union of States is completely vital, and the Soviet Union – as an ideal type – continued this tradition. But the inequality that was an organic part of the Soviet Union system – the horizontal one among republics, the vertical one between the centre and the periphery – destroyed this idea. Will this happen to the European Union? So far it has happened less frequently, or with less serious consequences, than to the Soviet Union or to the United States during the Civil War. Again, are we dealing with something completely different than the classical empires? It is a rather interesting question to discuss.

**M.M.** *Can Brussels be considered an imperial metropolis, from the perspective of coloniality?*

**A.E.** Yes, a metropolis always occurs where there is a centre that has the function of government. There should be a critical mass of these institutions gathering in one place, and this place naturally becomes privileged: here, people receive a higher salary, they have many secretaries, and so forth. Corruption is another component: the privileges multiply, they resist regulation, and they spoil their beneficiaries. I hope that this hasn't happened yet in Brussels, but in Moscow we know that it happens. Is this process inevitable?

**M.M.** *Well, I think we have touched upon some crucial problems in Soviet and modern European societies, that will give some new insight to readers. But I don't necessarily agree with you on the 'metropolis' status of Brussels: I have been*

*there many times, and I have seen that other national governments of the European Union, like Paris or London, are more important than Brussels, also in terms of managing the resources. Brexit has shown that Brussels does not (yet) resemble an imperial centre. Therefore, I consider the modern political European experience as an attempt to create a union outside the dichotomy metropolis/colony. Also, Brussels communicates not only with the national capitals, but also with the regions. I remember the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, who were trying to fight the feudals by supporting the cities' communes. I see present-day politics as an opportunity for a new beginning, in which politics can experiment with different models of equal relations where the centre/periphery relationship does not take the shape of the dichotomy metropolis/colony.*

**A.E.** Yes, you are right. But of course the idea of free will or voluntary choice has always gone hand in hand with the imperial construction. The Habsburgs said that provinces like Tirol or Venice voluntarily joined the Empire, and that it was love that bound them together. Russian historians now say the same about Siberia or Tatarstan: their willingness to belong to Russia is related to their self-sacrifice and pure love. Somehow, these new ideological justifications of empire tend to be more naïve and superficial than they were hundreds of years ago.

**M.M.** *Something like the 'eros of the empire', right?*

**A.E.** Yes, a sort of masochist eros.

**M.M.** *I think we're starting to head towards a different theoretical framework. I look forward to meeting again and continuing the conversation.*

**A.E.** Gladly. Thank you, Mikhail.

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**Mikhail Minakov, Alexander Etkind**

***Abstract***

Interview with Alexander Etkind.

***Keywords***

Imperial Experiences, Postcolonial Theory, Metropolis, Periphery.

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