



# THE COLONIZED POLAND, THE ORIENTALIZED POLAND. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY FACING “THE OTHER EUROPE”<sup>1</sup>

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**Słowa kluczowe:** orientalizm, postkolonialna geografia, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, Larry Wolff, Tony Judt, dyskurs historyczny, narodowa tożsamość

**Abstract:** Dariusz Skórczewski, COLONIZED POLAND, ORIENTALIZED POLAND. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY FACING “THE OTHER EUROPE”. „PORÓWNIANIA” 6, 2009, Vol. VI, ISSN 1733-165X, pp. 95-105. In numerous instances, in contemporary studies in East Central Europe, the orientalising clichés of the Enlightenment episteme still continue to proliferate. In works by Larry Wolff and Tony Judt the author recognizes examples of latent orientalism in the approach of Western humanities towards history and cultures of the nations and ethnic groups between Germany and Russia. Founded upon the a priori authority of the Western academia, such approach leaves the role of the hegemon out of account. This contributes to further marginalization of these societies, which in turn leads to the cementing of the inferiority complex, so characteristic for all postcolonial populations.

**Abstrakt:** Dariusz Skórczewski, POLSKA SKOLONIZOWANA, POLSKA ZORIENTALIZOWANA. TEORIA POSTKOLONIALNA WOBEC „INNEJ EUROPY”. „PORÓWNIANIA” 6, 2009, Vol. VI, ISSN 1733-165X, ss. 95-105. Współczesne badania nad Europą Środkowo-Wschodnią w wielu przypadkach powielają orientalistyczne klisze oświeceniowej *episteme*. Na przykładzie prac m.in. Larry’ego Wolffa i Tony’ego Judta autor demonstruje utajony orientalizm w podejściu zachodniej humanistyki do historii i kultury narodów i grup etnicznych położonych pomiędzy Niemcami a Rosją. Ufundowane na apriorycznie uznanym autorytecie zachodniej akademii, podejście to nie bierze pod uwagę w dostatecznym stopniu roli odegranej przez hegemonia i pogłębia marginalizację badanych społeczeństw, co prowadzi do utrwalenia kompleksu niższości, charakterystycznego dla wszystkich populacji postkolonialnych.

George Orwell's famous dictum “History is written by the victors” can be read in diverse ways, partly depending on how “victors” and “victory” are defined. In this paper I briefly examine one of these ways as related to Poland's and East Central Europe's experience in the past two centuries.

Larry Wolff's study titled *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*<sup>3</sup> is well-known for its analysis of the source and the process of

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constructing – or, inventing – the myth of Europe's underdeveloped, chaotic, and barbarian “East.” Although Edward Said is not singled out in the book, the reader can easily recognize the Oriental characteristics inscribed into this Western image of the East. And indeed, as can be inferred from Wolff's work, Eastern Europe became the “Orient” of the “West,” in the Saidean sense. This myth, Wolff argues, as a sheer product of European Enlightenment, contributed immensely to the congealment of civilizational and cultural supremacy of the “West” over the East. Wolff's main thesis can be summarized as follows: the West “needed” the image of its underdeveloped, uncivilized, backward and immature “Other” in order to consolidate its own picture as the embodiment of the progressive ideal of the Enlightenment. To achieve this end, Western Europe's “Other” was bound to be suitably presented and named, that is, equipped with a new type of identity as demanded by the orientalizing project. The inventing of such an “Other” was made possible thanks to the rediscovery of peripheral territory between Germany and Russia meridionally and the Baltic Sea and the Balkans, latitudinally. This territory, mostly populated by anonymous and indiscernible Slavic peoples, became an excellent and convenient matter for the creation of such an Oriental counterpart of the “West.” West Europe performed such a “discovery” primarily by means of pens of its great humanists: Fichte, Herder, Voltaire, and Rousseau, followed by scores of others: diplomats, thinkers, scholars, travelers, and poets. The consequences of such a strategy towards the new “Orient” were not difficult to anticipate. Various stereotypes, misconceptions and superstitions which have since then permeated the discourse on East Central Europe, for decades locked the minds of numerous foreign authors, politicians, journalists and tourists in unique “prisons of thought.” Even worse, they petrified a substantial part of scholarly reflection, including history, sociology, anthropology, and literary studies by imprisoning the interpretations of East Central Europe's cultural phenomena in clichés, denigrating or completely eliminating these phenomena, that is, moving them “out of sight.” All this made it nearly impossible to know and understand that which makes up the cultural face(s) and profile(s) of East Central Europe. This “orientalizing” condition is broadly experienced, although not broadly acknowledged, by East Central European scholars, primarily in the humanities, as often as they are exposed to professional encounters with their colleagues affiliated with Western, predominantly American, universities. The culture of the “Slavic”, or

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<sup>3</sup> L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1994.

“post-communist” Europe still remains an antithesis of 'Europeanness' rather than its completion.<sup>4</sup>

To achieve his goal, Larry Wolff did not coin a new theory. He confined himself to the re-creation of the main idea of Edward Said, who (supported by countless textual analyses) had been the first to articulate, with so powerful a rhetoric, the notion that “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the “West”) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”<sup>5</sup> Wolff's invention was to shift Said's conception onto the territory which was passed over in *Orientalism*.

East Central Europe has indeed turned to be a dream ground for the ideas of whole generations of Western “orientalists” up to our times. The decisive factor was the fact that in most instances, East Central European countries were either newly emerged nation-states (such as Ukraine, Belarus, or Slovakia) or structures long-absent from the map of Europe (such as Poland or the Baltic states). Inscribed in the past into the history of other lands and peoples, those countries accustomed the “West” to their “soft presence.” And as we know, this kind of presence effectively erases itself from memory, and not much can be done to remedy this, not even well-documented martyrology or the splendor of past centuries.

For the whole 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries orientalizing discourse was the dominating Western European narrative about the peoples and cultures of East Central Europe. Both in literature and journalism, which can be considered less surprising, and in scholarship and education, which is alarming<sup>6</sup>, and our anxiety grows as we approach the present time. However, a characteristic shift in accentuation occurs: the 18<sup>th</sup>-century calls for modernizing, so well-documented in Wolff by Voltaire's (in)famous tirades against Poland's backwardness and Polish Catholicism, soon give place to more neutralized, pseudo-objective scholarly and literary descriptions which for years up to our times shaped the European mental map and cultural imagination of subsequent generations of readers. In a nutshell, this is how

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Bobrownicka, *Antyteza słowiańsko-europejska. Z problemów stereotypu*, in: Red. T. Dąbek-Wirgowa, A. Z. Makowiecki, *Kategoria Europy w kulturach słowiańskich*. Warszawa, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1992, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*. New York, Vintage, 1979, p. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Some interesting conclusions can be drawn from A. Kochanowska-Nieborak's study *Franцуzi Północy. Obraz Polski i Polaków w niemieckich leksykonach konwersacyjnych XIX wieku* (Wrocław, Atut, 2007). Kochanowska-Nieborak's analysis of most German widely read 19<sup>th</sup>-century conversational lexicons allows to infer that besides growing negative perceptions of Poles after German Reich was established in 1871, in all editions of Brockhaus and Meyer lexicons, even before 1871, one finds the stubborn presence of German “superiority” towards the Poles, who are rendered as in need of a “civilizing mission”. Such motifs, nonetheless, were not merely products of German domination only, and can be encountered in other “Western” literatures as well. This matter calls for further study in orientalizing discourse on East Central European nations and ethnicities in Western European and American scholarship in a comparative perspective.

systematized knowledge about the populations of East Central European lands was born and accumulated. In the cognitive algorithm based on the juxtaposition of the “East” and the “West,” these populations were looked down at as inferior and “worse,” in terms of both race and culture, economy, politics, and mentality. Given all this, one should not be surprised that at present on the American continent, in a most popular 400-page textbook *Medieval Europe: A Short History* Poland is not given a single full paragraph<sup>7</sup>. Were it a single instance of the marginalization of Poland (and, along with it, the whole sub-continent), such a glaring under-representation could be considered an example of a well-known dismissive attitude of some American historians towards the Latin Middle Ages and be waved aside. However, this is not the case. Rather, it should be viewed as one of numerous examples of the long-term orientalization of East Central Europe in Western scholarly discourse. For decades, this phenomenon has either been allowed to remain intact by Polish and other East Central European scholars behind the “Iron Curtain” or has been explored from viewpoints very different from the Saidean perspective, and only recently has come under scrutiny alongside the debates in the humanities on the region's postcolonial status.

The advantage of Said's methodology is its power to reveal the questionable position of the observer, so inexorably inscribed into the orientalizing discourse. This position defines and privileges the attitude of the Western subject towards its “other,” “exotic,” and “backward” Eastern object, one that is said to be unable to articulate his own reasons. As it has been adumbrated in Maria Todorova's interesting essay<sup>8</sup>, it is in this way that Western historiography misrepresents Eastern European nationalism, which is conducive to the presentist, allochronic bearings of this phenomenon and its inextricable negative assessment in works by Western historians, political scientists, and cultural anthropologists.

Among recent scholarly works which more or less flauntingly demonstrate an orientalizing approach, Tony Judt's works can be singled out as characteristic examples.<sup>9</sup> Judt clearly eschews the elimination of East Central Europe and its history. Quite on the contrary, the region's complex political history is widely commented upon. What becomes apparent under closer scrutiny, though, is the fact that this history is filtered through a dense sieve of

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Bennett, C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*. Toronto, McGraw-Hill 2005 (10<sup>th</sup> edition).

<sup>8</sup> M. Todorova, *The Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of Eastern European Nationalism*. “Slavic Review” Spring 2005, vol. 64, no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> See: T. Judt, *A Grand Illusion? An Essay on Europe*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1996; *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. London, Penguin 2005. This paper was written before Judt's death and thus was not aimed at criticizing an author who is no longer able to defend himself. Rather, Judt's opus is considered here but an example (though a spectacular one, for reasons explained later) of the discussed type of approach towards East Central Europe in Western scholarship.

stereotypes which had been formerly mobilized in the Soviet discourse of self-representation that included the representation of the Soviet-subjugated countries. It was by means of those stereotypes that the Soviet Union effectively spoke to the "West," the first and foremost of them being the stereotype of a "single center." This stereotype, so widespread in Western historiography, efficiently suppressed "local" narratives of each and every ethnicity subject to the Russian hegemony. The complex and multifaceted vicissitudes of East Central Europe, after straining through such a sieve, would be easily framed by the discourse which, under the pretense of universalism, in fact accepted and duplicated the hegemon's viewpoint. Indeed, Judt does interpret Europe's modern history first and foremost in terms of the "conflicts of great powers," that is, the antagonisms of the great political and economical systems and their interests. An astute reader will notice in Judt's publications a belated imprint of orientalism in the fact that Judt's scholarly discourse, being part of the most powerful cultural discourse of the "West," is saturated with a collection of presuppositions regarding the importance, the role, and the meaning of East Central Europe *for* the "West." From Judt's studies on post-war Europe a mural emerges of a continent where lesser nations and ethnic groups are merely spectators of events that transpired on the "world's great stage," with no part played by these populations whatsoever. The decolonized societies of the Eastern subcontinent are relegated to secondary roles, and their claims to 'Europeanness' are mocked by the historian: "Whatever we would say about the former splendor of Prague or Vilnius, those cities were never capitals in the European meaning, such as Florence, Madrid, London or Vienna"<sup>10</sup>.

Judt's assumptions are betrayed by his rhetoric. When speaking of the communist People's Poland during the decade of Solidarity, he adds the following meaningful commentary: "Developments in Poland were but a captivating prologue to the story of the collapse of communism, because **the genuine history was transpiring elsewhere**"<sup>11</sup> (emphasis mine). Through the subtly distorting optics employed by Judt, a smoothed, coherent, and single-directional version of history emerges, one that is written "from top down."

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<sup>10</sup> T. Judt, *A Grand Illusion?* Quote from Polish translation: "Cokolwiek byśmy powiedzieli o dawnej świetności Pragi czy Wilna, miasta te nigdy nie były stolicami w sensie europejskim, tak jak Florencja, Madryt, Londyn czy Wiedeń" (T. Judt, *Wielkie złudzenie? Esej o Europie*. Trans. R. Włodek. Warszawa, PWN 1998, p. 40).

<sup>11</sup> T. Judt, *Postwar*. Quote from Polish translation: "Wydarzenia w Polsce były tylko porywającym prologiem do opowieści o upadku komunizmu, bo prawdziwa historia toczyła się gdzie indziej." (T. Judt, *Powojnie. Historia Europy od roku 1945*. Trans. R. Bartoń. Poznań, Rebis 2008, p. 688).

Such a history is an outcome of the premise that the powerful are given the right to speak on behalf of the weak. Such discourse first and foremost respects the version of events created or at least authorized by the metropolis – one whose monophonic structure would be possibly blown up by an uncontrolled polyphony of voices coming from the subjugated populations. The true history of East Central European societies, according to Judt, lies in someone else's hands, beyond these societies' influence. It is not that Judt refrains from deploring the misfortunes of the inhabitants of Poland and other former colonies of the Soviet Union. Quite on the contrary, he admits that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were subject to some most traumatic hardships. What is dubious is the position from which Judt expresses his sympathy. Even sympathy can be painful when accompanied by superiority rather than empathy. I argue that it is here that one must search for the sources of some of Judt's peculiar, most odd interpretations of the history of East Central European nations. He sees the splendor of old capital cities, such as Prague, Warsaw, and Budapest, in the cosmopolitan touch of their culture that in large part was created in the... “international German language.”

Destruction of this excellent Central European culture left Warsaw for the Poles, Vilnius for Lithuanians, Prague for the Czechs, and Budapest for the Hungarians, as provinces of Austria's Vienna [sic!]. Though placed in the center of Europe their claims to be distinguished as 'Central Europe' are at best, a nostalgia, and at worst, a pretense<sup>12</sup>.

The quoted examples are but a substitute of a far-flung discursive phenomenon which I cannot fully discuss in so short a paper. One should remember that whether the history or cultural artifacts of a marginalized society will come under the scrutiny of Western scholars, is primarily decided by this society's present prestige. Such prestige derives from political and economical position. The lower the status of a population, the weaker their voice, and the more attention received by the discourse of the metropolitan center. With no prestige, statements concerning the inhabitants of Eastern Europe, such as that cited by Hugh Seton-Watson, easily proliferate among readers in the so-called civilized world: “They have

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<sup>12</sup> T. Judt, *A Grand Illusion?* Quote from Polish translation: “międzynarodowym języku niemieckim, której znakomici przedstawiciele byli Żydami. Zniszczenie tej wysmienitej środkowoeuropejskiej kultury pozostawiło Polakom Warszawę, Litwinom Wilno, Czechom Pragę, a Węgrom Budapeszt jako prowincje austriackiego Wiednia [sic!]. Mogą być one umieszczone w środku Europy, ale domaganie się przez nich wyróżnienia jako »Europy Środkowej« jest w najlepszym razie nostalgią, w najgorszym zaś udawaniem” (*Wielkie złudzenie?*, p. 43).

unpronounceable names, and live in plains and forests, on mountains and rivers which might be in another world.”<sup>13</sup>

If such ignorance survived and is demonstrated by scholars even three generations after Seton-Watson's critical comment, how can we castigate authors and film-makers? In the widely acclaimed screen adaptation of Frederick Forsythe's *The Fourth Protocol*, a British agent when browsing the passenger list searching for a spy from East Central Europe, he passes over in silence the names of Poles for phonetic reasons. Doing so, he clearly repeats the rhetoric quoted by Seton-Watson, complementing it with a dismissive gesture, so well-known to East Central Europeans. Such a gesture is so typical of the “West” which only holds Russia and matters Russian in high esteem while passing over in silence populations and cultures of territories between Germany as the Western and Russia as the Eastern hegemon.

Apparently, Larry Wolff's study complements this deficiency. One may be tempted to say Wolff does it leaning mercifully over those doomed to defect. However, by showing the initial phase of the project of the orientalization of East Central Europe by this Europe's older and more aloof “sister,” Wolff's study is dubious as far as Wolff's methodology is concerned. In light of Wolff's constructivist premises, it can be said that the image of East Central Europe invoked in the book speaks more of its creators than of its subject matter. While Wolff's study suggestively delineates the views and ideas held by the “West” regarding the East European “Orient,” it fails to leave room for this Orient's factual image. In fact, Wolff's strategy disables this kind of reflection. It is unfortunate that East Central Europe “as such” is of no interest to Wolff, which he himself admits, explaining the methodological assumptions and limitations of his narrative in the concluding remarks of his book:

Eastern Europe is not the subject of this book. The grammar of the title emphasizes that Eastern Europe is considered here above all as an object, that is, the object of an array of intellectual operations practiced upon it by the Enlightenment in Western Europe<sup>14</sup>.

Paradoxically, by means of methodology, Wolff repeats the gesture of the elimination of the subject of the orientalizing discourse of European Enlightenment. Consequently, East Central Europe is yet again being relegated to an in-existent and unimportant object, deprived of its own agency and its own narrative. It is others that are given the right to grant East Central European peoples their identity, and are privileged to equip this identity with ethnic,

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<sup>13</sup> H. Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe Between the Wars, 1918—1941*, New York, Macmillan 1967 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1945), p. XV.

<sup>14</sup> L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 358.

linguistic, and racial characteristics on behalf of those peoples. Throughout the book, no question about the actual, inherent traits of those nations is posed, neither is there any hint by the author that those nations may have developed their own identity discourse. Rather, Wolff sees no unease speaking of Herder as one who “gave Eastern Europe its modern identity as the domain of the Slavs,”<sup>15</sup> as if the Eastern Europeans had no modern identity before or apart from Herder.

I do not wish to enter here into the philosophical controversy on essentialism or the debate on the historical sources of nationhood. All this aside, I wish to emphasize the main flaw of Wolff's approach in his otherwise interesting and well-documented study, that is, his ignoring the fact that his “Eastern Europe” is an actual space and peoples, and not merely a textual entity. Wolff tends to be satisfied with moving around in a world of simulacra, purely rhetorical constructs that are based on a unidirectional perception of some nations by others, apart from historical, political, and social realities. It is not, after all, that Eastern Europe was invented by the “West” in a sterile vacuum of discourse. Rather, this “invention” (if we accede to such a constructivist term) was preceded by a series of hardcore events and processes, such as the partitions of Poland in the late 1700s or the treating of Poland by Russia as a “trampoline” of Russia's foreign policy in Europe<sup>16</sup>, and not merely an innocent fulfillment of “fantasies of influence and domination”<sup>17</sup> of Western philosophers and authors. These facts, given the common knowledge of their political, economical, and cultural outcome as well as their clear ethical qualification, should be considered in a scholarly publication in the form of as much as contextual minimum. Their absence from the book cannot be justified by methodology and should be regarded as a peculiar example of professing the principle 'Slavica non leguntur', ironically one of the key principles of the historical discourse of Poland's Western hegemon, i.e., Germany/Prussia.

Both Wolff's and Judt's perspectives call for a vital revision, or better say, a contrapuntal completion, one that will adequately emphasize the agency of societies formerly subject to the discursive violence of orientalization. Not only are the works of these two scholars cut off from the realities of East Central Europe, but they also turn their back from these nations' experience, as if the cultures of these nations did not exist as independent, self-

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<sup>15</sup> L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> I am employing here German historian K. Zernack's metaphoric term – see: K. Zernack, *Niemcy—Polska: z dziejów trudnego dialogu historiograficznego*. Ed. H. Olszewski, trans. Ł. Musiał, Poznań, Wyd. Poznańskie 2006, p. 163. Cf. K. Zernack, *Deutschlands Ostgrenze*, in: Red. A. Demandt, *Deutschlands Grenzen in der Geschichte*. München, Beck, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 362.



contained, civilized, and whole entities. All this proves that while Western humanities have forged efficient instruments for critical analysis of the hegemony of Western empires over their former 'third world' colonies, it is still far from working out appropriate non-Orientalist categories in which to frame the historical experience and cultures of the former colonies of the Soviet Union. Instead, East Central European countries have all-too-often been routinely lumped together with their oppressor and labeled 'second world', as if they voluntarily aligned themselves with the Soviet empire.

The outlooks of the two scholars discussed here, apparently having not much in common, oddly intersect. This intersection helps better realize that the constructivist perspective of Wolff does not boil down to an innocent speculation as one might think. Let us take a close look at how Judt relates to the problems taken up in *Inventing Eastern Europe*:

What distinguishes Eastern and Western Europe did not start in 1945 or even in 1918. Those 18<sup>th</sup>-century travelers and observers who 'created the image' of the Oriental half of Europe, imposed on the rest of the continent their biased interpretation drawn from their own anxieties and frustrations, but after all they **have not invented a completely unreal place.**<sup>18</sup> [emphasis mine]

In a respective footnote Judt loyally admits that Wolff's view is altogether different, but the dialectics of these two perspectives is entirely demonstrable as far as the image of the region is concerned. As one can infer from the quoted passage in Judt, Judt adopts Wolff's constructivist theses and essentializes them, thus acknowledging the limited validity of orientalist statements. In other words, Judt reinforces the reference suspended by Wolff. Judt's argumentation can be summarized as follows: although the enlightened "orientalists" created an "imagined" portrayal of Eastern Europe, this depiction was not merely a work of their imagination. On the contrary, it had to be rooted in factuality. This is how the 18<sup>th</sup>-century orientalism having made a wide circle stages a powerful comeback, forcing its way into contemporary historical discourse. This modern orientalism brings in stereotypes and ideas stored in that discourse, including the notion that the nations of the Eastern subcontinent require patronizing and maturing under the wings of the "West." This notion is based on an implicit premise that only the tutelage of Western institutions and scholarship can guarantee those nations economical and social success, and can afford the rest of the continent peaceful

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<sup>18</sup> T. Judt, *A Grand Illusion?* Quote from Polish translation: "To, co różni Europę Wschodnią od Zachodniej, nie zaczęło się w 1945 roku ani nawet w 1918 roku; ci osiemnastowieczni podróżnicy i obserwatorzy, którzy »stworzyli wizerunek« orientalnej połowy Europy, narzucili reszcie kontynentu pełną uprzedzeń interpretację pochodzącą z ich własnych trosk i niepokojów, lecz przecież nie wymyślili miejsca całkiem nieprawdziwego" (*Wielkie złudzenie?*, p. 47).

existence free from unexpected and undesired excesses. It is not difficult to notice that such reasoning is in fact a modern continuation of the logic of the “civilizing mission,” which by nature excludes any contribution of the nations subject to such a mission. It also clearly disables any attempts by these nations to negotiate another rank in discourse than a “subaltern” one. One needs not to add that not unlike in the Enlightenment, in both Wolff and Judt dialog is disabled as it is only one party that takes the privileged position of the subject, while the other party remains the immature “Other,” one deprived of his/her own voice and reduced to a mere object of description.<sup>19</sup>

In his book Wolff consistently jettisons the viewpoint of East Central European populations that had been forced into the orientalist jacket. Is he right doing so? Provided he violated his own methodology and, simultaneously, the perspective of the “West” allowed the perspective of the “subalterns”, such a price would not be too high to pay, given the cognitive as well as ethical advantage from such a clash of perspectives. It seems that Wolff has not been unaware of the fundamental flaw of his narrative. In the last paragraphs of his study he generously gives voice to Eastern Europe. The most striking thing about it, though, is that for this goal he chooses... Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. He considers Tolstoy's voice “so commanding” and his work “so overwhelming, as to offer a counterblast to the brilliance, the erudition, the confidence, of the philosophers.”<sup>20</sup> For the readers who know Ewa Thompson's brilliant capture of the postcolonial overtones in Tolstoy's masterpiece submitted in her *Imperial Knowledge*, Wolff's choice of *War and Peace* cannot but seem ironic. Here, another questionable aspect of Wolff's study is made manifest: the homogenous image of East Central Europe and the uniformized perspective which levels the vital polarity of the region, so fundamental for the identity of East Central European societies. Wolff remains insensitive to the differences between states, nations, and ethnicities on one hand, and Catherine the Great's Russia on the other. Instead, he throws all of them into one bag misleadingly labeled “Eastern Europe.” By doing so, he neglects historical realities, such as the fact that both during the Enlightenment and in later periods for many of those nations Russia was a hegemon. Given that, making Russia and those societies one entity considered as “orientalized” by the “West”

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory. A Critical Introduction*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 373.

is not only a simplification of the problem but also a serious factual and methodological error.<sup>21</sup>

As a possible alternative to Wolff, one may suggest a rival and competitive narrative. Such a narrative should describe how Eastern Europe was invented by non-Germanic Central Europe.<sup>22</sup> In such a narrative it should also be acknowledged that the monolithic and monochromatic image of Europe's close "Orient," as reconstructed by Wolff and accepted as "factitious" by Judt, is accompanied by and juxtaposed to a diverse gallery of images of the "West." These images proliferate in cultural, educational, political, and scholarly discourses from East Central European societies, especially those whose cultural horizon was in large part defined by Latin civilization and Occidental sympathies. This diversity was commented upon by Milan Kundera in his famous essay "The Stolen West or The Tragedy of Central Europe"<sup>23</sup> and strongly contradicts Wolff's conclusion. This diversity results partly from the strong bonds with the "West" of the Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Slovenians, and other nations, and partly from a different type of collective experience of the countries under the Soviet domination vis-à-vis Western experience. Western historians (Norman Davies being a rare exception) usually underestimate the fact that to preserve their identity, many European societies among former Soviet Russia's colonies exercised great effort in jettisoning the cultural influence of the Soviet metropolis. Instead, in a lesser or greater degree such populations as the Poles refused to participate in Russia's civilizational project and stubbornly admitted their kinship with tradition and values of the Western world rather than their Eastern Slavic neighbor. In what measure such refusal was efficient and the empire's influence indeed rejected, are questions that will have to be addressed by postcolonial critics. To be sure, the Polish experience is but an component in the constellation, yet a vital and unique one as it embraces the two usually separate and contradicting elements: a powerful awareness of strong cultural bonds with the "West" (not Western hegemony), and colonization by imperial powers of the West (Prussia/Germany and Austria as the Habsburg Empire).

The problem outlined in this paper does not boil down to a pragmatic postulate that East Central European societies be at last freed from the label which the Enlightenment

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<sup>21</sup> A similar thesis to Wolff's concerning Russia's orientalization by the "West" has been submitted by E. Adamovsky in his book *Euro-Orientalism: Liberal Ideology and the Image of Russia in France (c. 1740-1880)*, Oxford-Bern 2007. See also: review by S. R. Boss, "The Sarmatian Review" September 2007, vol. 27, no. 3 and Adamovsky's response and Boss' reply: "The Sarmatian Review" April 2008, vol. 28, no. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Such a proposal was submitted by Hungarian sociologist C. Dupcsik in his review of Wolff: *Postcolonial Studies and the inventing of Eastern Europe*. "East Central Europe" 1999, vol. 26, no. 1.

<sup>23</sup> M. Kundera, *The Stolen West or The Tragedy of Central Europe*, (originally published in Czech as *Únos západu aneb Tragédie střední Evropy* in 1983).

discourse and the subsequent orientalizing discourses created for them. It lies somewhere else, and it cannot be solved by means of the concepts and instruments employed by Wolff and Judt. Firstly, their attempts to expose and dismantle this discourse lead astray, as such attempts prove to be a subtle continuation of the criticized discursive practices. Secondly, the orientalization of East Central Europe which transpired in the public discourse of the Western world has deeply penetrated the psychology and culture of East Central European populations, which had a twofold effect upon them:

1. It created some peculiar socio-psychological qualities and phenomena in the social life of those societies, including myths, views, opinions on major questions, and complexes, such as inferiority complex.

2. It fueled various scholarly concepts and theories by which to rationally explain these phenomena.

In both instances, the Foucauldian “power of discourse” is evident. It is exactly in the set of images, beliefs, clichés and stereotypes created and imposed by the orientalist discourse, that the inferiority complex of the Poles as well as other East Central Europeans is rooted. This complex consists in the ambivalent sense of one's meagerness and paltriness mixed with ceaseless looking out for the approval of the “West,” and can be traced both with average East Central European individuals and intellectuals, as the two groups demonstrate likewise a predilection to succumb to orientalist concepts for the very reason that these concepts have been disseminated by the Western cultural center and thus by default carry epistemological authority with them. It would be worth scrutinizing in what measure the orientalist epistemological patterns inscribed in Western texts by scientists, diplomats, writers, travelers, etc. penetrated Polish identity discourse in various periods, shaping and imprinting this discourse with those texts' subtle mark of “authority,” so difficult to recognize and so difficult to remove. Foreign narratives, independent from their authors' intentions, consistently made the Poles, their history and culture(s) an object of scrutiny, and were not disconnected from how Polish Romantic thinkers and poets viewed themselves and their nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One can run the risk and formulate a hypothesis that the internalization of orientalist clichés was conducive to the dissemination in Polish society of two kinds of stereotypes: a hypernegative and a hyperpositive one, to employ Mykola Riabchuk's instructive terms.<sup>24</sup> These two kinds of stereotypes are two extreme and opposite

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<sup>24</sup> M. Ryabchuk, *From 'Little Russia' to 'Indo-Europe': The Stereotype of the Nation in the Ukrainian Public Consciousness and Social Thought*, in: Red.. T. Walas, *Nations and Stereotypes*. Cracow, International Cultural Center 1995.

emanations of the defensive attitude of the colonized population. Their appearance is not limited to political discourse or even literature. They continue to function in the humanities as dominant patterns of interpreting reality which are the outcome of the absorbed orientaling discourse. They prove to be unfortunate conceptual matrices by means of which many post-colonial intellectuals attempt a re-reading of social and cultural phenomena of colonial genealogy. One example of such a study is Maria Janion's acclaimed book titled *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* ("The Incredible Slavdom") on Romantic and contemporary debates on Polish identity. That book is based on a false excluding alternative: *either* ultra-Catholic nationalism, *or* resignation from Christian (or, Latin) roots of identity for the sake of the so-called "Slavic idea," that is, a peculiar incarnation of Pan-Slavism.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the traps and parochialism of current humanistic discourse pointed out in this paper, Western postcolonial studies not excluded, I believe that a non-orientalizing and non-orientalized, that is, *disinterested* and *honest* scholarly description of the "Other" is possible, as hoped for by Edward Said in his concluding remarks in *Orientalism*. Such studies in the histories and cultures of East Central European societies should seek to offer a critical and methodological framework that will allow for local specificities and avoid the imposition of incompatible categories. For such a scenario to happen, "a critical language pertinent enough to represent the complex histories of dependence in a region that can be defined as the broadest conceivable margin of Europe"<sup>26</sup> is indispensable as a necessary prerequisite. Otherwise, East Central Europe will once again fail to become a self-contained object of scholarly exploration and will be turned into some de-realized and troublesome construct, its experience useless, superfluous, and unintelligible to the Western world. A way out of the snare in which both Wolff's and Judt's (and others', such as the mentioned Janion's) works are found to have been trapped may be post-colonial studies that pays adequate attention to the current post-colonial condition of the region, aimed at detecting and defining of the nature and scope of colonial oppression. However, to escape rehearsing Wolff's and Judt's flaws and reproducing the Orientalist styles of knowledge, one must take seriously Said's warning: "I consider Orientalism's failure to have been a human as much as intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. D. Skórczewski, *Kłopoty z tożsamością. Na marginesie Niesamowitej Słowiańszczyzny. "Porównania"* 2008, no. 5.

<sup>26</sup> D. Kołodziejczyk, C. Şandru, *Introduction: On colonialism, communism and east-central Europe – some reflections*. "Journal of Postcolonial Writing" May 2012, Vol. 48, no. 2, p. 113.

experience.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the exclusion of East Central Europe from the discourse of the humanities must end as a long overdue residue of the region's colonial subjugation and be replaced with an attitude that opens the door for knowledge that is based on a broader and contextual understanding of the region's complex historical and cultural configurations.

*Transl. Dariusz Skórczewski*

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<sup>27</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 328.