

Additions to the Discussion of Post-colonialism

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This article demonstrates that the Soviet occupation of Estonia can be discussed as colonisation. Since Estonia was the victim of colonisation, it is right to use the approach and the terminology of the theory of post-colonialism to explain the history of Estonian art. The colonial administration founded the institutions suitable for the subjugation of Estonian art and restricted it ideologically and administratively. Compensatory trends in Estonian art developed. One of the trends was based on pre-war art, but also on the search for an authentic indigenous culture. The other trend tried to imitate Western avant-garde art. In the study of the Estonian art of the colonial period, it is important to consider its singularity.

For about a decade, some Estonian theorists of literature have discussed the problem of whether, and to what extent, in discussing the history of Estonian literature, it is important to focus on the theory of post-colonialism.¹ The aim of this article is not to go deeply into the theory of post-colonialism, but to proceed from the problems raised by the Estonian theorists of literature and, to a great extent based on the interpretations of the theory of post-colonialism taken into use by them, to discuss two issues: 1) to demonstrate that it is appropriate to signify Soviet occupation in Estonia as colonialism, and 2) to discuss ways of explaining Estonian art history during and after the Soviet occupation using the theory of post-colonialism.

The Estonian history of the twentieth century has been discussed mainly without reference to the concept of colonisation. But I find that it is necessary to understand that the Soviet rule in Estonia was in fact colonisation. What happened in Estonia was not exceptional in Europe. Latvia and Lithuania, and even Poland, share the same history. The conquest of Poland by Nazi Germany was brief, but in the subjugation of Poland we can see all the symptoms of colonisation. Approximately the same can be said of the Baltic states. The main difference from Polish history is certainly the fact that the USSR subjugated the Baltic states in 1940 by the mere threat of war. The Baltic states were occupied and annexed. A large number of the elite were killed, and local administration was subordinated to Moscow. This subordination was carried out partly by Russian officials, and the

¹ E.g. T. Kirss, Rändavad piirid: postkolonialismi võimalused. – Keel ja Kirjandus 2001, no. 10, pp. 673–682; E. Annus, Postkolonialismist sotskolonialismini. – Vikerkaar 2007, no. 3, pp. 64–76.

Russian language began to supersede the local languages. The Estonian economy was subjected to the interests of the empire, and Estonia's natural resources were devastated. Latvia and Estonia were populated by numerous colonists. The power of Moscow was justified by its so-called progressive ideology and Estonian culture was censored and deformed. Poland and the Baltic states were modern nation-states and their similar fates, as the victims of the colonial politics of Nazi Germany and USSR, provide additional proof of the essential similarity of those two totalitarian regimes. The Stalinist Soviet Union used communist ideology as its justification but, under that mask, the rhetoric (as well as the practice) of the restoration of the tsarist colonial empire grew stronger and often more straightforward during and after World War II.

The Soviet regime in Estonia is often defined not as colonisation but as occupation. It is accurate to talk about the occupation of Estonia in 1940 and again in 1944, but the term 'occupation' alone does not fully explain the character of the Soviet period. The term 'annexation' (forced incorporation) is preferred or used in parallel with the term 'occupation' in documents of major political significance.

The notion of annexation is also essential for the issues discussed in this article, because annexation has been one of the means to obtain colonies. Annexation was used especially by the continental empires, including tsarist Russia. The European continental empires dissolved during World War I and, in Russia, the Bolshevik revolution was triumphant. That is why, in the minds of the European people of the twentieth century, the

notion of 'colony' meant mainly overseas colonies and that is one of the reasons why the theorists of post-colonialism have ignored colonisations in Eastern Europe. The other reason for ignoring these colonisations is obviously the fact that the theorists of post-colonialism considered the Soviet Union (as well as the other 'socialist countries') to be primarily an ally in criticising Western colonialism, and saw the Soviet Union as a friend of the Third World. That is why they cannot see or fully admit the crimes committed under the mask of communist ideology. It may also be possible that some theorists have, without justification, extended their own experience of colonialism into a universal model of colonialism.

The situation has recently begun to change. One of the most outstanding critics of the geopolitical narrow-mindedness of post-colonialist theory is David Chioni Moore. Unlike many of his colleagues, he has noted analogies in the history of geographically distant and socially and culturally different people. Moore does not deny the differences between Soviet colonialism and the British-French model, but he feels that it would be wrong to consider one to be a norm and the other one a deviation.²

In analysing Soviet colonialism, Moore has demonstrated how it was expressed and influenced in different ways in Central and Eastern Europe, in the Baltic states, in Central Asia and in the Caucasus. Among Moore's correct ideas that are widely known to us, there are some that need to be specified. For example, he is right that Russian colonists

2 D. C. Moore, *Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*. – *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Eds. G. Desai, S. Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, p. 518.

envied the culture of the Baltic and Central European people and even had a feeling of inferiority in relation to them. However, in my opinion, those feelings were accompanied and often dominated by imperial pride and the belief in the special mission of the Russians. In the tsarist times, this belief was supported by the myth of the 'Third Rome' and, in Soviet times, by the propaganda of being the first socialist state in the world. Colonised Europeans did have the impression that the Soviet colonisers were barbarians rather than people introducing a higher culture. However, this did not make colonial oppression easier to bear. It was perhaps just the opposite: the oppression was experienced as something especially unjust. Colonists have probably been seen as barbarians by most colonised people. Moore also does not take sufficiently into consideration the differences in Soviet politics in the 1920s, in the Stalinist period and in the post-Stalinist period.

In conclusion, we can say that there is a firm foundation for speaking of a 'postcolonial situation' in Estonia and, therefore, there is a basis for examining how the theory of post-colonialism could help to explain the Estonian history of art.

I agree with Tiina Kirss, who has stated that the colonial period was essentially not uniform and differences in rhetoric were possible.³ One way of discussing the problem in the history of Estonian art is to consider three different discourses: the empire-minded discourse, the discourse oriented towards the Western avant-garde and the national-conservative discourse.⁴ The nature and complicated relationship

between those three discourses changed a lot during the five decades of Soviet rule. The aim of the empire-minded discourse was to subordinate Estonian art to Soviet standards and ideals and, in this way, help to bolster the colonial subjugation of Estonia and to assimilate Estonians step by step. The theoretical component of that discourse was the theory of socialist realism. Over the course of time, and especially under the influence of the erosion of the Soviet system, major changes took place in the theory of socialist realism itself. The influence of the empire-minded discourse is easily recognisable in some Estonian works of art.

Another, less discussed, problem was the influence of colonisation on Estonian art institutions. In the Soviet art life, there were features that referred quite clearly to the art life of the monarchies of the 18th–19th centuries, for example the system of the Artists' Unions and the role played by the Academy of Arts of the USSR.

The difference between the situation in the colonised Baltic states and that in many other colonies was that there was much less admiration of the colonists in the Baltic states. In the Estonian post-colonial rhetoric, it is emphasised that the Soviet period was an interruption that disconnected us from Europe, where we had always belonged and where we are returning now. The role and the content of the above-mentioned discourses changed during the perestroika-period. The empire mentality receded quickly and soon disappeared altogether. The supporters of the national-conservative mentality began to value the Estonian art of the pre-war period of independence, especially the art of the Pallas school, but also exile art. The style established by Kaljo Põllu in the 1970s, a romantic variant of national

3 T. Kirss, Rändavad piirid, p. 677.

4 See J. Kangilaski, Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseerimine. – Ajalooline Ajakiri 1999, no. 1, pp. 23–29.

conservatism, was still practised and admired. In David Chioni Moore's opinion, the creation of heroic myths, the endeavour to establish the authenticity of one's own culture and the search for primordial purity form a typical, 'compensatory tendency' of a post-colonial culture.⁵

The other type of compensatory tendency, in subjugated nations according to Moore, was the creation of new forms of culture, which were admired for a long time, but were restricted by authorities. For those oriented towards the international avant-garde, unprecedented opportunities opened up. Now they could communicate with the West, exhibit their works and gain information. Just like in the Soviet times, in the first years of the restored independence, the ideological differences in Western art life were not fully understood and not taken into consideration. We can obviously draw the conclusion that it was, in fact, the post-colonial culture in which, according to Homi K. Bhabha, the signs of the other, more authoritative culture obtained a new meaning.⁶ And it was not until the 21st century, when Estonia had become an ordinary Western-type society, where clearly different discourses in art – conservative, liberal and radical left – started to form.

I agree with Epp Annus's opinion that, because the Western countries did not colonise Eastern Europe, it is more accurate to speak of the relationship between the centre and the periphery than to speak of post-colonialism in discussing the relationship between the Western and

Eastern European countries.⁷ But we should not consider these two factors totally separately, because the influence of both of them on cultures was quite similar. This is also confirmed by Piotr Piotrowski's recent criticism of the approach in art history that transforms trends originating in the centres into universal standards for the development of art.⁸ This kind of approach also assumes that the 'periphery' should describe and evaluate its art according to those standards. Piotr Piotrowski calls that approach 'vertical', and offers 'horizontal' art history as an alternative. The horizontal approach involves each national culture having its own conditions and original development. Professor Piotrowski admits the closeness of his theory to the theory of post-colonialism. These two theories would be seen as being even closer if he did not identify the theory of post-colonialism with its 'essentialistic variant'. Anti-essentialistic post-colonialism and Piotrowski's theory support each other and encourage every nation to speak of its own art in its own way.

5 D. C. Moore, *Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?*, p. 522.

6 H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 37.

7 E. Annus, *Postkolonialismist sotskolonialismini*, p. 74.

8 P. Piotrowski, *On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History*. – *Umeni/Art* 2008, no. 5, pp. 378–383.