



J. J. Grandville, *La revanche, ou les Français au Missouri*, 1829. Zdroj: Akademie der Künste der Welt [website](#).

**Vjera Borozan:** You are currently writing a text for a publication that will be the result of a research project entitled “Perverse Decolonization”. First, I would like to ask you to briefly introduce us to the project and to the topic of your contribution.

Jan Sowa: The project addresses the parallel phenomenon of the right-wing capture of left-wing intellectual tools and the left-wing turn towards identity politics, in which questions related to one’s identity – be it gender, ethnicity, or race – completely overshadow other concerns, especially those related to class position and the material forces shaping contemporary societies and economies.

A particularly important area of our research has been postcolonial theory and its bizarre yet symptomatic fate in Central-Eastern Europe, where it has become a tool to articulate right-wing resentment, affirming the region’s specific identity and refusal of the Enlightenment. It is closely linked with the conceptual framework of poststructuralism and its conservative design, which equates the Enlightenment with oppression, reason with domination, and modernity with colonialism. None of us would like to defend oppression, domination, or colonialism, nor to deny the suffering of subjugated classes, whether in the West/North or in the postcolonial global South; however, I believe that the poststructuralist framework – very much against the intentions of its main protagonists – has provided an uncanny basis for defending what one can only call obscurantism: the religious fundamentalism, exclusion of

difference, and disdain for science that we can see in climate change denial or the anti-vaccination movement; obscurantism is treated as “a valuable part of local traditions”, and its defence presented as a sort of “epistemic justice”, to use the term dear to poststructuralist theorists.

**The crisis of postcolonial studies and identity politics, or their misuse by the new right-wing populist and nationalist movements, is a key symptom for the diagnosis of the present. We can observe this phenomenon on a global scale, and it does not concern only us in post-communist Eastern Europe. Would you describe its causes?**

It is a complicated combination of neoliberal economic policies and the basic coordinates of poststructuralist *episteme*. There is a general backlash against liberal individualism, which has never been an attractive subjective position for those who could not enjoy the benefits of being members of the middle class within Western welfare states. People facing various kinds of threat in the contemporary world – precarisation, unemployment, lack of social stability, uncomfortable labour relations, etc. – are striving to find support and comfort in collective identities. In an unfortunate way, a marriage of neoliberal ideology and poststructuralist narratives has destroyed any form of progressive collective identity and institutions, mainly class and trade union. Whether it was intended or not, Marxism has been a major enemy for both neoliberals and poststructuralists. However, for different reasons, of course, intentions are far less important than consequences. And the major consequence of that harmful conjuncture has been the revival of primordial identities, namely religion, nation and family – the only ones to survive that assault. In the intellectual climate that followed, it has been far easier to defend one’s cultural traditions than universal claims for social justice. Universal as such has been put into the category of forbidden phallogocentrism. Is it surprising that the founding moment of the populist revolt is an affirmation of all sorts of particularisms, especially religious and ethnic identities pitched against any attempts at enlightenment? This is, for example, the logic of Polish right-wingers who deny the rights of women or gays, claiming that these rights are not part of “our cultural traditions”, and that attempts at introducing them in Poland are part of the colonization of Polish culture by the European Union, in itself treated by the Polish right as a colonial project. How can you argue with that in a sense-making way if you are a poststructuralist deconstructionist? You cannot.

**How do you perceive the relationship between postcolonialism and post-communism? Specifically, to narrow this very general question, I will give an example from a local context in which the internationalism, cultural exchange, and solidarity of socialist Czechoslovakia with the Third World were replaced in the 1990s by a new, rather marginal theoretical perspective of often ambivalently applied postcolonial studies. Can this trajectory be traced in Poland, and in what direction are current postcolonial studies headed there?**

As I said above, Polish postcolonial studies have been dominated by the right wing, and I believe this to be a result of their basic flaws. What was dubbed by Gayatri Spivak “strategic essentialism” has turned into an essential strategic failure. One could say that the chief Polish postcolonial theorist today is Jarosław Kaczyński, who accuses the Germans of using the European Union as a disguise for European domination and encourages Poles to defend “our way of life” against foreign influence.

I have to say that I do not agree with the notion of “post-communism” if it is understood as an attempt at explaining the condition of the region through the legacy

of the Soviet period. It is an incarnation of modernization theory, which interpreted the fall of the Soviet bloc as a proof of an ongoing global convergence. As a matter of fact, in many important respects it was rather a divergence. The GDP of post-Soviet countries may now be closer to that of the West than was the case 40 years ago; however, when it comes to the secular state or women's rights, we are farther apart. In fact, I believe that the so-called communist legacy explains very little of the contemporary situation. Populism is a global phenomenon fed by neoliberal austerity rather than by any historical ideologies or events – unless somebody thinks Donald Trump won the US presidency in 2016 because Stalin ruled Eastern Europe in the 1950s. It would be very difficult to argue with such a position in any rational way, however.

**In the mid-1990s the Bulgarian theoretician Alexander Kiossev came up with the term “self-colonization”, already applied to cultures that were not really colonized but were subject to the cultural power of Europe and the West. What is your opinion of this concept, which is often applied to the countries of the former Eastern bloc?**

I think Kiossev is correct in the assumptions that led to his coining the concept of “self-colonization”. Central-Eastern Europe is not remote and independent enough to resist the influence of dominant societies, too close to them to comfortably retain its own particularism, but also too strong and distinct to be fully absorbed. It puts it in a peculiar relation to the Western Universal that is very different from much of the postcolonial world, which is too weak to promote itself into the position of universalism but remote and autonomous enough from the dominating centers to retain its particularism and to self-define (for example, the societies of the Muslim world or sub-Saharan Africa). Where I do not agree with Kiossev's position is in his poststructuralist denial of the material and economic dimension of world domination. It does not seem to be random that some countries succeed in making their values gain the position of the Universal and others fail. It is not difficult to prove that what is universalized are the values – aesthetic, ethical, social, and other – of the strong ones, and the strong ones are those who are rich. When the economy is thrown out the door, it comes back in through the window.

**Returning to the Perverse Decolonization project, the adjective “perverse” refers, inter alia, to the moment of the reversal of perspectives, resulting in a new and different view of the world, showing the “periphery/semi-periphery” as “perverse avant-gardes” and/or the future of “centres”. Basically, as you put it in your Prague lecture in autumn of 2018, today's Budapest or Moscow are basically the London or New York of the future. Could you explain and illustrate these theses with specific examples?**

Yes, I believe we can see such a reversal, which is pushing us in a direction opposite to the one advanced by modernization theorists in the 20th century. The centre was supposed to lead the way, while the peripheries would follow after a delay of a couple of decades. This was how Daniel Lerner saw the modernization of the Middle East in the 1950s, and how Francis Fukuyama saw the post-Soviet world in the 1990s. The same was presumed to be true of internal social evolution, in which everyone was supposed to follow the example of the individualistic middle class of the Western countries, who occupied a hegemonic position in their respective societies. What we see today is rather the opposite: the conservative-populist revolution is invading the centre from the peripheries, both externally – Central Europe, India, the

Philippines, etc. – and internally in terms of the revolt of the lower classes, for example the *gilets jaunes* movement in France. Just look at the electoral geography of Germany and the advance of the AfD from the east, or the class distribution of support for Brexit in the UK. It is a complex and under-researched phenomenon, but the basic force behind it is, I believe, the toxic results of the accumulation of capital. Populism is just a dark reverse of neoliberalism, a revolt of those who were supposed to be obedient cannon fodder for the accumulation process, both at home (the lower classes) and abroad (the peripheries/colonial world). The latter lacked the protection of the welfare state, which softened class antagonisms in the West/North and thus postponed the revolt. Once neoliberalism destroyed it, the shit hit the fan, to put it in the simplest terms.

Populism is just one, maybe the most important, example. There are others, such as the decline of secularism. France seems to be more like Turkey today, not the other way around, as one of the hottest political issues is the headscarf – a central question of Turkish politics since Atatürk but hardly a problem in France until the 1990s. Or look at the evolution of Western/Northern cities and their slow drift towards the realities of the postcolonial/peripheric South: not without reason has London been called “Lagos on Thames”. The decline of social services, such as the sorry state of Britain’s railways – which resemble India more than they did four decades ago – or the crisis of the NHS, makes Britain more similar to poor African countries than to the standard of the so-called developed world. Or consider the precarisation of labour relations in the Western world, which was dubbed “latinoamericanization” by Ulrich Beck in the 1990s. All this may be treated as a reversal of the basic advances of modernity that make the centre look more and more like the periphery.

**Cameroonian philosopher and theoretician Achille Mbembe also reaches similar conclusions. In his latest book, *Critique of Black Reason*, he describes, among other things, how the contemporary “imperialism of disorganization” has created a new form of planetary existence, which he describes as the “Becoming Black of the world”. In your opinion, what do these processes and facts lead to?**

I think it is a very similar phenomenon to what I propose to call “de-modernization” and prefer to describe in structural terms, not referring to identity (race or skin colour). What I find sad is that identity politics has turned the grievances of different groups into kinds of private property. It is very difficult to relate one struggle to another without risking accusations of cultural appropriation or even worse. In 2017, the art world was shocked by the attack of a black artist, Hannah Black, on the Whitney Biennial, provoked by the fact that a white painter, Dana Schutz, had represented the open casket of Emmet Till, a black teenager murdered in 1955. Black claimed that the gesture of the open casket was done “for the black community to see” the injustice and violence done to blacks in the US, while a member of Till’s family affirmed, in the discussion that followed, that Emmet’s mother had decided to open the casket “for the world to see” what had been done to her son. It is a very symptomatic difference – actually, “the world” seems to be politically incorrect as a category, because it implies a certain wholeness, and the latter is treated as an oppressive and violent notion in the poststructuralist conceptual framework. It is a deeply political problem. I would say that “Becoming Black of the world” coincides with “Un-becoming of the world as such” and its shattering into a myriad of incommensurate particularities. At the same time, capital is globally unified and dominant as never before. How are we supposed to struggle against it in such a fragmented political environment?

**One of the starting points of the Perverse Decolonization project is the critique of postcolonial studies from the perspective of Vivek Chibber, professor of sociology and your collaborator. In his analysis of Edward Said's renowned *Orientalism*, Chibber links the success of the book with the turn of the intellectual elites of the era to "culturalism", which allowed colonialism to no longer be linked with capitalism and the problem of class struggle. This disconnection, he said, permitted the analysis of colonialism as a separate form of dominance. Nations, races, and civilizations as cultural carriers became key actors, instead of classes. Nowadays, colonialism is understood as the product of the "cognitive orientation of the West" or "Western rationality", rather than of capitalism, as was the case in the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Chibber also took a critical stance towards Walter Dignolo's "decolonial theory" (and of other authors such as A. Quijano and E. Dussel), based on the "colonial difference(s)", emphasizing the other side's perspective, which used to be silenced by Eurocentric discourses favouring the concepts of modernity, postmodernity, and Western civilization. What is your view of Chibber's criticism, specifically of its friction with decolonial theory, which, among other things, has a significant resonance in the field of contemporary art?**

I think it is functional for the art world to deny the class-material aspect and to affirm the cultural one, as by this operation it puts itself in a much better position. If economy and class are not the problem, you can stop questioning the global art market, art-world jet set and corporate sponsorships – let's just do some politically correct and socially committed exhibition with funding from the Sackler family or BP! It is particularly relevant in the US context, as the US lacks public funding for art.

I think Chibber is correct in his critique of postcolonial studies and identity politics. We are again facing the problem I talked about at the beginning: "culture" is also a term favoured by neoliberal pundits who talk about the need for "cultural adjustments", about the "culture of poverty", or about the "cultural roots of wealth and success". It is not exploitation that made the West rich, it is rather its cultural superiority – its rationalism, its work ethic, its entrepreneurialism, etc. We can see again a dangerous conceptual convergence between neoliberalism and poststructuralism, for which Marxism seems to be the main villain.

**According to Vivek Chibber, we are currently seeing that capitalism has become not only global but also universal. To be able to face the new forms of capitalism and the acute global problems related to them effectively, according to the conclusions articulated in your discussions, our current task is to co-create new universal platforms, new universal horizons. What do you think these should look like, so that we avoid the mistakes related to universalist projects of the past and also avoid remaining on the level of abstraction?**

This is a difficult task, maybe the most difficult of all. Maybe we should redefine universalism in class terms and stop thinking all the time about cultural differences. When you take the Middle East, for example, the real threat that emanates from there is not Islam – however dangerous and terrifying Islamic fundamentalism may be – but the oil industry, which is not Islamic but capitalist. Within the Western/Northern countries the only really dangerous and problematic minority are the rich. The fact that the elites do whatever they can to avoid taxation is much more harmful to the general society than all the teachings of all radical imams residing in these countries. So, instead of debating how to force Muslim women not to wear the headscarf, we should be attempting to force the rich – be they Muslim or Christian – to pay taxes and contribute

to social welfare in the same way as everyone else. Another dimension of the same problem is the climate emergency. It is said that we are living in the Anthropocene era, which is defined by the permanent, material influence of human beings on the planet. Yet the poorest billion people could disappear right now and nothing would change in terms of climate processes; these people just consume and produce so little that their ecological footprint is negligible. Aren't they human too? The challenge is not how to make these people accept Western rationality, but how to stop the affluent Northern classes from ruining the planet and thus making it uninhabitable for everyone, including themselves – after all, we all need to breathe and drink water uncontaminated by plastic. So, I'd say we should struggle for the universal, as in “universal suffrage”, “universal taxation”, “universal biological needs”, or “universal dependence on ecosystem”, not “universal religion”, “universal language” or “universal rationality”. In this sense, the political name of this universal is “equality”.

**Jan Sowa** is a dialectical-materialist social theorist and researcher. He holds a PhD in sociology and a habilitation in cultural studies, he concentrates on researching modernity. He was the curator of discursive programs and research of Biennale Warszawa and he currently is associate professor at the Department of Culture Theory at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.