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Making Sense of Postcolonial Theories and Applying them to the Relationship between Eastern and Western Europe

Introduction to the Module

This module aims at understanding the core elements of the theories developed by Nicolaj S. Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (born 1948).

In contemporary history textbooks, colonialism is merely described in terms of power and exploitation systems, which will be easily comprehensible to students of upper secondary level. Nonetheless, the thesis of Postcolonial Studies, namely that this power system is based on a specific (Eurocentric) view of the world on the part of the colonizers, is rarely dealt with in history textbooks and history education. This aspect of colonialism will be new for many students. Even more profitable will be the question of whether this view of the world has changed in contemporary times. For this reason, dealing with Trubetzkoy's remarks holds enormous didactic potential.

Intensively examining both theoretical approaches (Trubetzkoy and Chakrabarty) will firstly enable the students to gain a deeper understanding of the long-standing, worldwide consequences of colonialism and, secondly, this will enable them to question self-critically their own view of the world as well as to notice rash political strategies in international affairs.

Both theoretical texts are supplemented by a source text. The selected source is a good example for the strong relation between the categories “power” and “knowledge”.

Sources

Source 1: Extract from “Europe and Mankind” by Nicolaj S. Trubetzkoy, 1922

Nikolaj S. Trubetzkoy (1922): Europa und die Menschheit [Europe and Mankind], quoted from: Fedor B. Poljakov (ed.) (2005): Russland – Europa – Eurasien. Ausgewählte Schriften zur Kulturwissenschaft [Russia – Europe – Eurasia. Selected essays on cultural science]. Vienna, 35–40.

Preliminary remarks: Nicolaj S. Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) was a Russian linguist and ethnologist, who worked as a professor in Vienna in the 1920s. At that time, he formulated criticism of the categorical power of Europe over others. He especially criticised the European world view, which tended to ignore all characteristics not fitting into the European schema of knowledge or depreciate them as being “non-historical”. Trubetzkoy characterised the Eurocentrism of non-Slavic Europeans as a very restricted view.

There is no doubt that to Europeans, chauvinism and cosmopolitanism seem to be opposites, perspectives that differ from each other in principle.

However, it is impossible to agree to this point of view. One must only take a closer look at chauvinism and cosmopolitanism to realise that there is no radical, fundamen-

tal difference between the two, that what we are dealing with are merely two steps and two different aspects of one and the same phenomenon.

The chauvinist assumes, a priori, that his own people is the best in the world. His people alone legitimately deserves superiority and dominance over all others; these would have to subordinate, adopt its belief, language and culture and coalesce with it. Anything standing in the way of this great people's final triumph must be swept away violently. This is how the chauvinist thinks, and he acts accordingly.

The cosmopolitan however refuses national distinctions; if there are such distinctions, they are to be destroyed. Civilised humankind should be uniform and have a homogenous culture. Uncivilised peoples would have to embrace this culture, join it, and after entering the family of civilised peoples advance with them on the one path to world progress. Civilisation is the greatest good; national particularities are to be sacrificed for its sake.

Formulated like this, there seems to be a sharp distinction between chauvinism and cosmopolitanism. The former postulates the sovereignty of a culture of an ethnographic-anthropological individuality, the latter claims sovereignty for a culture of humankind beyond specific ethnographic groups.

Let us however take a closer look at what criteria the European cosmopolitans assign to the expressions "civilisation" and "civilised humankind". Civilisation is understood by them as the culture which was established by the Romanic and Germanic peoples of Europe together. Civilised peoples are understood to be firstly the very same Romanic and Germanic peoples and only afterwards those other peoples who adopted European culture. Thus, we see the following: That culture which according to the cosmopolitans should gain superiority and dominate the world is the culture of a similarly specified ethnographic-anthropological unit as the one the chauvinist dreams of. There is however no principal difference here. [...]

If we turn to the European cosmopolitan now, we will see that there is no real difference between him and the chauvinist. That "civilisation", that culture deemed the highest by the European cosmopolitan and making every other culture pale in comparison, a culture of certain wealth and values, is the common good of some peoples connected by blood and shared history. The chauvinist abstracts from the specific characteristics of the individual ethnic groups which have come into the population of his own people; in the same way, the cosmopolitan pushes aside the cultural characteristics of the individual Romano-Germanic peoples and only picks what has been added to the common wealth of their culture [...]

This adds up to a complete parallelism between chauvinists and cosmopolitans. Essentially there is one and the same attitude towards the culture of the respective ethnographic-anthropological unit the person in question belongs to. There is a difference only insofar as the chauvinist chooses a smaller ethnic group than the cosmopolitan. [...]

The difference, therefore, is only in degree, not in principle.

In judging European cosmopolitanism we always have to take into account that the terms "mankind", "human civilisation" etc. are extremely vague and encode very definite ethnographic concepts. European culture is not the culture of mankind; it is the historical product of a certain ethnic group. The Germanic and Celtic tribes which came under the influence of Roman culture to various degrees and mixed profoundly with each other created a shared lifestyle from elements of their own and the Roman culture. [...]

The Prussian cosmopolitan, who is indignant about his pan-Germanic fellow countryman and labels his opinion as narrow-minded chauvinism, does not realise however that he himself is such a chauvinist – just that he is not a German chauvinist, but a general Romano-Germanic one. Thus, the point is merely the degree of capability to sense the egocentric basis of every form of chauvinism. This capability is more strongly developed in some people, somewhat weakly in others, and in all Europeans relatively. Seldom does anyone move beyond the so-called cosmopolitanism that is Romano-Germanic chauvinism. Europeans, however, who consider the culture of the so-called “savages” equal to the Romano-Germanic culture – such Europeans are unknown. They appear non-existent.

(Original text in German)

Source 2: Extracts From “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” by Dipesh Chakrabarty

Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992): *Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who speaks for “Indian” Pasts?*, in: *Representations* 37, 1–26, here 2–3.

Preliminary remarks: A cofounder of “Subaltern Studies”, the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (born 1948) is one of the pioneers of postcolonial historiography. His studies point to the limitations of applying central categories of European modernity to analysing non-Western societies and have significantly contributed to a criticism of Eurocentrism.

That Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge itself becomes obvious in a highly ordinary way. There are at least two everyday symptoms of the subalternity of non-Western, third-world histories. Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate. [...] the “greats” and the models of the historian’s enterprise are always at least culturally “European”. “They” produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that “we” cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level without taking the risk of appearing “old-fashioned” or “outdated”. [...]

This problem of asymmetric ignorance is not simply a matter of “cultural cringe” [...] on our part or of cultural arrogance on the part of the European historian. These problems exist but can be relatively easily addressed. Nor do I mean to take anything away from the achievements of the historians I mentioned. Our footnotes bear rich testimony to the insights we have derived from their knowledge and creativity. The dominance of “Europe” as the subject of all histories is a part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world. This condition ordinarily expresses itself in a paradoxical manner. It is this paradox that I shall describe as the second everyday symptom of our subalternity, and it refers to the very nature of social science pronouncements themselves.

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers shaping the nature of social science have produced theories embracing the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind – i.e., those living in non-Western cultures. This in itself is not paradoxical, for the more self-conscious of European philosophers have always sought theoretically to justify this stance. The everyday paradox of third-world social science

is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of “us”, eminently useful in understanding our societies. What allowed the modern European sages to develop such clairvoyance with regard to societies of which they were empirically ignorant? Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze?

There is an answer to this question in the writings of philosophers who have read into European history an entelechy of universal reason, if we regard such philosophy as the self-consciousness of social science. Only “Europe”, the argument would appear to be, is theoretically (i.e., at the level of the fundamental categories that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton which is substantially “Europe”.

Source 3: Extracts from an article in *Ilustracja Polska*

Quoted from: [Untitled], in: *Ilustracja Polska*, No. 11 (1902), 241–242.

“Oblivion, lies and hatred surrounded Poland with an impregnable wall. What is needed today is a brave traveller, a discoverer, to explore the secrets of that hard-working land located in the very heart of Europe, where twenty million souls live.”

With these words in French Mr Antoni Potocki begins the announcement of a publication that is significant in every respect. This richly illustrated book, titled “*La Pologne contemporaine*” will be published in September this year. It is a work for both foreigners and for ourselves.

Poland, too occupied with constant worries about its own national existence, for a whole century had no time to tell its story. Its artists, writers and scholars are considered, despite protests, as Russians, Germans or Austrians. Although the results of Polish work and development can be found at all so-called international exhibitions, that sum of work and progress, hidden among official groups of three partition powers, not only escapes the notice, but even worse – it contributes to the glory of our enemies.

In the meanwhile, a true revival can be perceived in the Polish territory, formerly torn into three parts and impoverished a century ago, presents itself today as a busy and thrifty anthill.

During this century, Poland has been able to organize its national and social life. It has created its own industrial centres that rival with the largest centres in the world. It has established true colonies overseas and – most importantly – has called masses of people to protect the national cause, which used to be the task only of the most privileged class.

Thus, Poland is a unity, a nation in a modern understanding of this word, a nation that is growing and rising slowly, but with relentless strength.

That revival, whose vigour must be admitted even by the Polish enemies, should be proclaimed to the world. Hatred, lies and oblivion should be combatted with truth – the genuine truth. [...]

The work is not, perhaps, a definitive one, nevertheless it presents a complete image – for the first time after a century of constant battle. [...]

The names of the authors whose texts made up this great work are not mentioned in the prospectus. The reason being, if they are Russian or Prussian subjects, they might be persecuted. [...]

Nowadays, this is the usual fate of writers who dare to speak the truth. Prussia followed the Russian example and, one must admit that, considering the Prussian constitution, that country exceeded its master when it comes to anti-Polish fierceness.

Continual trials and atrocious sentences in the cases of Polish journalists and men of letters in Prussia prove it only too well. [...]

We will combat hatred and lies and prove that we are alive. People of good will and faith will no longer be able to use the fact that they could not find any information about Poland as an excuse.

Such a book will prove incredibly beneficial not only for foreigners, but also for ourselves. For the first time we will have a review of our powers. Even today one can say that we do not know ourselves and that we are too ignorant of our own abilities.

(Original text in Polish)

Embedding the Module in a Sequence

The module is part of a sequence on colonialism. It is possible (and reasonable) to organize the sequence in ways that take into account not only overseas colonialism but also inner-European power relations. The sequence can be extended by, for instance, referring to contemporary issues such as the 2003 debate on a so-called “core Europe” (see module “Who Owns the Polish Past? Polish History Seen from Western European and Polish Points of View”). Alternatively, it can be extended by analyzing images of Poland in the late 18th and 19th centuries (module “Images of Poland in Germany in the Late 18th and the 19th Centuries: Precondition of Colonial Power Relations?”).

This module is based on a deductive method; dealing with theories (interpretation models) is the focal point of the lesson. Because of this, as well as the complexity of the selected texts, the module is suitable for upper secondary classes only.

Learning Aims and Competences

Trubetzkoy’s thesis that cosmopolitanism can be seen as a gradually modified form of chauvinism, insofar as the cosmopolitan simply chooses a much larger reference group than the chauvinist, might be unsettling for the students at first, triggering productive cognitive dissonance: “Aren’t we all cosmopolitans today, condemning the attitudes of the chauvinist?”, they might ask themselves. In this respect, the text gives the students grounds to reflect on what “civilization”, “culture” and “progress” mean: are these axiomatic and firmly defined entities to be asserted worldwide (still today)? or: are these entities, as Trubetzkoy suggests, rather constructed from the standpoint of a European “culture”, “civilisation” and understanding of “progress”?

Dipesh Chakrabarty even goes one step further than Trubetzkoy: he argues that these entities and values also unfold their effects in the formerly colonized countries. They have become part of knowledge systems encompassing the whole of humanity. According to Chakrabarty these knowledge systems “have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind”. Still today, as he argues, these knowledge systems are not only valid in the former metropolises but also affect the way of thinking and scientific approaches of intellectuals from the “third world” – even when dealing with their own countries.

The two theoretical texts are to be concretized with a source text. In the chosen source, the author points out that the partitions of Poland not only hindered political and societal developments but also blocked the Poles’ access to their cultural heritage. Again, the students should initially be unsettled by this source, because it is taken from

a European context, not from a more expected Indian or African one. This will lead to the questions of whether inner-European colonialism existed, as well as whether the term “Western European Centrism” is more appropriate than Eurocentrism and whether Chakrabarty’s thesis statement that Europe is a “silent referent in historical knowledge” should be concretized to indicate that this “silent referent” is Western Europe only. The thesis statement can even be further sharpened: In many cases the term “Western Europe” does not relate to a geographical area at all, but is rather used as a geographically detached marker to refer to concepts such as “democracy and market economy”.

Tasks

1. Summarize Trubetzkoy’s central idea and his argumentation in your own words.
2. Summarize Chakrabarty’s central idea and his argumentation in your own words.
3. Compare the two theories. Which similarities and dissimilarities can you find?
4. Select one of the theories and apply it to an interpretation of the text taken from the *Ilustracja Polska* of 1902.

Expected Student Answers

1. In the text passage Trubetzkoy focuses on a conceptual pair referring to seemingly opposed mentalities: chauvinism and cosmopolitanism. His thesis is that there is complete parallelism between chauvinists and cosmopolitans. That is, as he argues, because both have the same relationship to the culture of a particular ethnographic-anthropological unit and, furthermore, there is just a difference in degree between the two since the chauvinist, compared to the cosmopolitan, chooses a much smaller ethnic group as point of reference. Firstly, Trubetzkoy refers to the chauvinist who uses his own nation as reference group. The chauvinist sees his own nation as the best of all nations and other ethnic groups have to subordinate themselves to his nation’s rule and culture. The cosmopolitan, on the other hand, objects to any national differences and calls for a homogeneous culture of civilised humanity. Uncivilised peoples would have to embrace this culture, join it, and after entering the family of civilised peoples advance with them on the one path to world progress. At first glance these two viewpoints seem to be completely antithetical. According to Trubetzkoy, however, this antithesis is dissolved by considering what exactly the cosmopolitans understand by “civilisation” and “culture”. It becomes clear that – as with the chauvinists – a particular civilisation and culture, namely the Romano-Germanic, is meant. Therefore the two concepts are products of a specific historical development restricted to a particular geographic region. The cosmopolitan is thus “a general Romano-Germanic” chauvinist.
2. The central message of Chakrabarty’s text is that “Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge”. Not only well-known European historians, but, paradoxically, also historians from the former colonies (Chakrabarty speaks of the “third world”) refer to a Eurocentric knowledge system even when dealing with their own pasts. Key works in historiography – like key works in the humanities in general – “have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind”.

3. In his approach Chakrabarty goes beyond Trubetzkoy's argumentation. Nonetheless Trubetzkoy's statements can be seen as basic concepts for Chakrabarty's approach. The "philosophers and thinkers shaping the nature of social science" for generations that Chakrabarty refers to might, to a certain extent, be seen as cosmopolitans because these intellectuals speak for the whole of humanity in their theories, whereas they produced their theories in "ignorance of the majority of humankind". Thus, they apply criteria historically anchored in their European culture to global phenomena.

However, Chakrabarty moves beyond this in two respects: Firstly, he is not solely referring to the political/cultural position of a cosmopolitan, but also to an encompassing structure of thought, ultimately the whole of the humanities. Furthermore, he points out that the humanities, although Europe serves as their point of reference, function as the central knowledge system within which intellectuals from countries of the, as Chakrabarty calls it, "third world" think and conduct research. This consequence of colonialism results in the "third-world" intellectuals' access to their own cultural heritage being blocked or at best achieved only with difficulty.

4. It may be useful for the students to decide on the broader approach by Chakrabarty. The essential part of the Polish source can be found in the last sentence: "For the first time we will have a review of our powers. Even today one can say that we do not know what is ours and that we are too ignorant of our own abilities." This statement refers to a compendium of Polish history reviewed by the author of the article. The compendium takes Poland, and not one of the three partitioning powers, as point of reference. It can be seen as an attempt to establish a Polish knowledge system challenging the dominant knowledge systems of the partitioning powers. In his article, the author points out how difficult this attitude was during the 19th century. Poland had no voice to speak for itself, could not write its own history, because Polish researchers were perceived as intellectuals of the partitioning powers, not as Poles. Nonetheless, one can only assume, these intellectuals as well as the authors of the reviewed compendium did not become part of the knowledge systems of the colonising powers. With the example of Poland, the article demonstrates the struggle of a colonised country to gain access to its own cultural heritage. The article also shows that, despite attempts to avoid assimilating Western knowledge systems, the Polish intellectuals make intensive use of Western categories and orient their history toward the patterns of Western master narratives with the vocabulary of the West. This becomes particularly obvious in the lines in which the author states in which ways Poland has advanced to "a nation in a modern understanding of this word".

The application of the theories in the interpretation of this source text offers the learners the opportunity to question critically their own perspective on the world.

Design of the Learning Process

Steps/ Phases/ Methods	Factual aspects	Learning aims/ Competences	Commentary/ Explanation
Introduction and outline of the problem	Discussion of the pointed summary of Nicolaj S. Trubetzkoy's thesis: The cosmopolitan is basically not different from the chauvinist. His point of reference is only larger. Instead of the nation he uses the European culture.	The students are asked to give their opinion on Trubetzkoy's thesis as summarized. It can be expected that the majority of the students will disapprove of Trubetzkoy's statement. The central questions could be the following: "How is such a thesis statement justified?" "What does it mean for dealing with the colonial past?"	Instead of a class discussion the application of a method called "barometer" is suitable in this phase. The students line up along an imaginary barometer in the classroom to mark their standpoints towards the quotation between approval and disapproval. They shortly give reasons for their respective standpoint.
Elaboration phase 1: Group work activity	Texts by Trubetzkoy and Chakrabarty	The students prepare the central thesis statements and lines of argumentation of Trubetzkoy and Chakrabarty.	First, every student reads and analyses one of the texts. In groups the analyses of the texts are compared and a presentation is prepared. Due to the high complexity of the texts a cooperative and work-sharing method is recommended. The further discussion is then carried out with the help of the teacher in form of an in-class talk. If there is enough time, it is recommended to let the whole class deal with both texts one after the other.
Securing of the results: Plenary	Analysis and comparison of the texts	Presentation of the results by means of visual support	The students are given a surveillance sheet which they use to take notes during the presentations; teaching aim: all students have understood the central thesis statements of both texts. Similarities and differences between the thesis statements are discussed and noted (blackboard).

Steps/ Phases/ Methods	Factual aspects	Learning aims/ Competences	Commentary/ Explanation
Elaboration phase 2: Single work phase and partner work according to individual learning speed	Preparation; application	The students analyse the text taken from the Ilustracja Polska.	
Discussion and transfer: Open plenary discussion	Thesis of Postcolonial Studies about the relationship between colonial domination and knowledge	The students discuss in what way the source can be seen as an example for the relation between power and knowledge systems strongly emphasized by Postcolonial Studies.	If applicable, final teacher input with explanations

