

MARTIN MÜLLERGlobal Theory Does Not Believe in Tears

This text is Martin Müller's response to the comments on his article "In Search of the Global East" by Adam Leszczyński, Jan Sowa, Magda Szcześniak, and Tomasz Zarycki. The author defends in it the perspective of the Global East, advocating for three ways to further intervene in the geopolitics of knowledge: revising existing concepts and theories (instead of emulating them), conducting comparative research beyond the Global East, and extending the theory to geographic areas other than Eastern.

Keywords: Global East, postsocialism, geopolitics of knowledge, global theory

Today I received an e-mail from a large publishing house, asking me whether I wanted to edit a *Handbook of the Global East*. One can move from marginal critique to establishment in less than two years these days. Apparently, the term 'Global East', experimental as it is, has enough sex appeal to convince publishers that it will sell. This e-mail could serve as the serendipitous occasion for a triumphant riposte to the doubts of Adam Leszczyński and Tomasz Zarycki (both this issue) as to whether the Global East can work: 'yes, it can!' But it might also confirm Jan Sowa's (this issue) worst fears, who I see quipping that it is akin to 'organizing a marketing campaign to advertise the end of capitalism' (177). After all, editing a handbook with a Western publisher risks reinforcing the very practices and hierarchies it seeks to challenge.

I am under no illusion that the publisher contacted me because of the intellectual value of the project of the Global East, or because of its emancipatory thrust. They contacted me because they smelled a net positive return-on-investment. But will it be an epistemic and intellectual project worth pursuing? Will it create new ideas, stimulate debates and make space for new voices? These are central questions of the Global East and I thank the four commentators for their time, thoughts and the good grace with which they engaged with my work. Thanks for sharing dreams (Zarycki), as envisioning a conceptual utopia was part of the exercise that I engaged in. Thanks also for sharing disillusionment and the feeling that the Eastern *zadupie* (Polish for 'godforsaken land', if I read Adam Leszczyński well, and a possible precursor of the Southern-German *Hinterdupfing*?) might be beyond redemption. Thanks for pushing me further to think through class (Szcześniak) and global capitalism (Sowa).

For this reply, I have distilled three main questions from the four commentaries. I have phrased them in a pointed fashion, even if the commentators express them with much more eloquence and nuance.

Do we need to think the Global East (more) through class and capitalism?

Any analysis of the postsocialist East must grapple with the violent force of integration into global capitalist relations. The extent and trajectory of this integration have varied, of course, from the posterchildren of the capitalist transition – Poland and the Baltics, to the wayward children of Russia and Central Asia. The brandscapes of the high streets and peripheries in Eastern European cities are a familiar neon-litany of

Western labels and corporations. Questions of class and class aspirations through consumption, as raised by Magda Szcześniak, and of who calls the shots in global capitalism, as Jan Sowa enquires, are important. They receive a marginal treatment in my article – not, however, because I thought them negligible. The ample literature on the topic attests to the contrary (Boatcă 2006; Cabada 2020; Vliegenthart 2010, as just a few among many).

But my purpose is a different one. My piece intervenes in the global geopolitics of knowledge: who produces knowledge for whom, and with what consequences? The global geopolitics of knowledge is not a direct mirror of capitalist power relations. Economic heavyweights such as Germany, France, China and Japan are minor players in knowledge production and are outflanked by much smaller countries such as New Zealand, as I have shown in a recent study in the field of human geography (Müller 2021). Postsocialist countries, such as Poland and Russia, punch far below their economic weight in this game (Trubina et al. 2020).

Who dominates the geopolitics of knowledge is not just a question of economic power and excellent universities, although it is this as well. It is more a question of language, and of sign systems and affective attachments more generally. The hierarchies of desire and knowledge are more obdurate than those of money and wealth. The Czech Republic now has a higher purchasing power per capita than Italy (here and below, reference is to IMF 2020 Gross Domestic Product in purchasing power parities per capita for 2020). But will we soon be reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* instead of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and listening to Smetana's *Vltava* instead of Verdi's *Aida*? No. An average Lithuanian now creates more comparative economic value than a Spaniard. Will we soon flock to Vilnius instead of Barcelona? No. The average Pole produces more wealth in purchasing power terms than the average Greek, but does that make us crave *pierogi* and *gołąbki* more than *gyros* and *moussaka*?

None of the economic indicators above turn the Czech Republic, Lithuania or Poland into centres of global capitalism, of course. The headquarters of blue chips are elsewhere, as Sowa remind us. But many countries of the East have nevertheless become rather wealthy countries in global terms. The OECD, for example, lists Romania and Russia as high-income countries, Bulgaria as an upper-middle-income country. (There are, of course, significant domestic inequalities that such averages disguise, as Szcześniak remarks.) Yet, in the geopolitics of knowledge, these same countries are perhaps more peripheral than the much poorer Global South (Waldstein 2010; Petrovici 2015; Tlostanova 2015). This

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situation is exacerbated with the Southern and decolonial turn in global theory (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011; de Sousa Santos 2014). In other words, Warsaw will soon have the highest building in the EU, speaking not least to its economic prowess; but the Varso Tower (what a subtle play on words) is still designed by the British Foster + Partners. The vectors of desire and knowledge are much more inert than the centres of the economy.

If we talk about economic forces, the most persistent, I think, is where desire meets the economy to create an affective economy (Ahmed 2010; Schurr and Militz 2018). In an affective economy attachments and detachments, attraction and aversion create or annihilate economic value. Much of the East is enveloped in a negative global affective economy – that of neglect, greyness, blandness, boredom. Magda Szcześniak rightly draws our attention to how these are linked to the perception of a failed modernity. What is interesting is that this negative affection also holds for many people in the East themselves, as Leszczyński demonstrates with his list of vernacular nicknames.

Is the Global East too diverse to hold together?

The thirty countries (or thirty-and-a-half, if one counts East Germany) that emerged from the dissolution of state socialism have taken widely different economic and political trajectories in the past thirty years; to the point that I have argued elsewhere in favour of abandoning the concept of postsocialism (Müller 2019). Yet, the Global East, as a concept, does not seek to build political or economic unity. That would indeed be a tall order. Somewhat more modestly, it seeks to create a movement towards epistemic emancipation. That is difficult enough, but there is a chance, I believe, to succeed.

The societies of the Global East share at least two predicaments in the global epistemic space. First, an exclusion from the hemispheric categories of North and South that are increasingly used to frame debates in global theory and decolonialism. Second, an external status in (Western) European colonialism as neither direct colonisers nor direct colonies. Incidentally, these predicaments are shared by a number of other imperial formations, notably those of the former Ottoman, Chinese, Persian and Japanese empires. For that reason, I have started to write of the Global Easts in the plural (Müller 2020b). I hold that these commonalities do create a shared epistemic position from outside the (Western) European colonial dyad and its culmination in Western

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modernity. That epistemic position enables what the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky (2005 [1923]) called ‘The Knight’s Move’. Like the chess piece of the knight, this move is not straightforward, but forward and sideways, ‘our tortured road is that of the brave’¹. It is this sideways glance on Western modernity – its achievements and theories – that the epistemic position of the East can proffer (see also Boym 2017).

To be sure, the Global East lacks the shared Other of European colonialism that is so powerful in similar movements in the Global South. Power relations do run every which way, as Sowa writes. What is more, many scholars in Eastern Europe welcomed the dissolution of socialism as a (re)turn also to the academic community of (Western) Europe. As such, the priority has been to attain recognition in European scholarship rather than to criticise it, as Zarycki and Szcześniak remark. Waldstein (2010, 100) senses a danger of provincialism in this European allure: ‘After all, the hunger for outside wisdom, just as intellectual xenophobia, is itself a sign of provincialism.’ The status of Western Europe is therefore far more ambiguous for the Global East than it is the case for the Global South, where it was, for the most part, the colonial Master. Rallying against a common oppressor is therefore less obvious for the Global East.

Is the Global East possible?

But there is also a strength in that awkward position vis-à-vis (Western) European colonialism. The surprise turn of the knight’s move entails that ‘the strength of the semi-periphery resides primarily in the cultural and epistemic sphere’ (Boatcă 2006, 320). I am confident that we are at a historical juncture that will allow the Global Eastern project to take flight, contra Zarycki’s and Leszczyński’s doubts. What makes me so hopeful is the turning tide on both sides. In global theorising, the Southern and decolonial turns have created propitious conditions for theories from outside the core to be heard and to make difference. Certainly, much of this centrifugal movement still focuses attention on the former (Western) European colonies, but it does not have to stay this way. In the East, a new generation of scholars has come of age, producing outstanding research (Gierat-Bieroń, Orzechowska-Waław-

1 The full quotation in Russian goes: Наша изломанная дорога – дорога смелых, но что нам делать, когда у нас по два глаза и видим мы больше честных пешек и по должности одноверных королей.

Yet, global theory does not believe in tears, to recoin a popular Russian proverb. Self-pity will not get us far. Many interventions have deplored the peripheral status of the East in global theory, and explored reasons for it. Now is the time to get up and get going. The project of the Global East, as I have started it, is meant to create an opening for new, Eastern voices in global theory (e.g. Müller and Trubina 2020b).

ska, and Kubicki 2020; Kajdanek, Pietraszewski, and Pluta 2018; Kusiak 2017; Zysiak et al. 2019 as just a small, and hopelessly partial, selection of what I am aware of in my field, urban studies, on cities in Poland). This is a generation more at ease with English and often more critical of the European forefathers and – mothers – whether this is Durkheim or Weber or Deleuze. Too often, however, their contributions are read only within a narrow circle of specialists.

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I see three ways of going forward, each equally valid and equally necessary (see also Robinson 2016 for further inspiration). First, **revising concepts and theories** instead of emulating them. We are all keenly aware that concepts in the social sciences and humanities are context-dependent. A concept that works well to describe urban change in New York will often not work well in Warsaw. This calls for revising concepts and, in the process, flagging that these concepts are not as universal as they are sometimes taken to be. Scholars have done that for the concept of gentrification, highlighting the limits of applying it to cities in the Global East and proposing modifications (e.g. Bernt 2016; Gentile 2018; Kubeš and Kovács 2020). Another fruitful avenue is to weigh into global debates on postcolonialism. Eastern scholars have rightly interrogated postcolonialism for its potentials and limits when it comes to shedding light on social and political processes, and for its uses and abuses in the Global East (e.g. Grzechnik 2019; Janion 2006; Snochowska-Gonzalez 2012; Tlostanova 2012; Waldstein 2010). I have done this by questioning the framing of mega-projects through urban entrepreneurialism, using the case of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics (Müller 2011). This act of revising and speaking back requires a careful

choice of audience, aiming not primarily at regional specialists, but at theorizing with a global reach. It is for this reason that I chose to first publish “In search of the Global East”, the article that is translated into Polish (see previous issue of *Praktyka Teoretyczna*), in the journal *Geopolitics* (Müller 2020a). This is an interdisciplinary journal read by political scientists, political economists and geographers, without a specific regional orientation.

The second way forward is to **engage in comparative research** beyond the Global East. The goal of this move is to destabilise regional and area studies framings, and to generate new conceptual insights through unexpected comparisons. Why not relate informality across Estonia, Germany and Guinea-Bissau (Tuvikene, Neves Alves, and Hilbrandt 2017)? Why not juxtapose urban activism in Eastern Europe and China (López and Yip 2020)? Why not examine cultural flagships in Ekaterinburg, Rio de Janeiro, Abu Dhabi and Hong Kong for their qualities as global buildings, as I am doing in a new project? Such comparisons would also deepen the links with scholars from other places who seek to decentre global theory and forge alliances, whether in the other Global Easts or the Global South.

The third avenue is to **extend theory**, to start here and move elsewhere. Scholars have done this by looking at temporality in urban development in Łódź and diagnosing an asynchronous modernity (Zysiak and Marzec 2020). A series of interventions seek to draw lessons from the East to analyse the populist and ‘illiberal’ turn in several Western countries, not least the US and the UK (Dzenovska and Kurtović 2018). Another effort looks at (post)socialist infrastructures and draws forward-looking lessons for building and analysing infrastructures around the world (Tuvikene et al. 2020). I have worked with a colleague in Russia on reconceptualizing ‘improvisation’ as a practice of making do with uncertainty (Müller and Trubina 2020a). On a different note, I would be curious to see a theorization of the emergence of portals such as Sci-Hub and LibGen in the Global East. Could this be a counterpoint and minor resistance to the corporate giants of the American West Coast that Sowa mentions?

Editing a handbook, as I was asked to do, would help advance along all of these three avenues. But it might also prematurely stake out the territory and smother an emergent discussion whose outlines we have barely started to discern. My experimental piece “In search of the Global East” appeared just two years ago – too short a time to move from experiment to institutionalisation in the form of a handbook. So I have said ‘no’ to the publisher. At least for now.

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Tytuł: Globalna teoria nie wierzy łzom

Abstrakt: Niniejszy tekst stanowi odpowiedź Martina Müllera na komentarze do jego artykułu „In Search of the Global East”, autorstwa Adama Leszczyńskiego, Jana Sowy, Magdy Szcześniak i Tomasza Zaryckiego. Autor broni w nim perspektywę Globalnego Wschodu, opowiadając się za trzema sposobami dalszej interwencji w geopolitykę wiedzy: rewizją istniejących pojęć i teorii (zamiast ich naśladowania), prowadzeniem badań porównawczych poza Globalnym Wschodem i rozszerzaniem teorii na inne niż wschodnie obszary geograficzne.

Słowa kluczowe: Globalny Wschód, postsocjalizm, geopolityka wiedzy, globalna teoria