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**Central-Eastern Europe as Postcolonially Involved
(Sub)peripheries***

**Giordano Christian, 2015. Power, Legitimacy, Historical Legacies:
A Disenchanted Political Anthropology, Wien, LIT VERLAG**

The latest book by Christian Giordano – Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), whom the readers of Eastern European Countryside (EEC) know perfectly well¹ – is a collection of 16 works (including 13 that were published before, between 2001 and 2014²) preceded by an introduction. These texts refer, amongst other subjects, to the anthropology of politics and economy, alongside issues of ethnicity, nationalism and interculturality in different regions of the world (Latin America, Southeast Asia, Western Europe and Southern Europe).

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¹ A member of its Editorial Board from the first issue (1993), as well as an author of many articles published in EEC concerning transformations of rural areas in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

² Among others, in EEC: Multiple Modernities in Bulgaria. Social Strategies of Capitalist Entrepreneurs in Agrarian Sector, Eastern European Countryside 2010/16.

Having considered the specific character of EEC, we focus on several chapters. Four of them³ more-or-less refer to the problems of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe⁴, while two of them⁵ may be said to introduce the reader to historically, culturally and methodologically complicated issues defining different parts of Europe.

Giordano discusses these issues already in the beginning of the book, giving some thought to the legitimacy of the division of Europe into western, eastern and central parts in the first chapter. He emphasises that although this division is often accepted and quite legitimised in social science, one should remember that, from the historical perspective, the discourse on Europe has always required references to what is not Europe. Moreover, Giordano's line of thought is consistent with the findings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri who, in their *Empire* (2005) book, propose a thesis on European identity (referring to 'the continent of civilisation, enlightenment and progress') shaped by the experience of colonialism.

Europe has needed something different to itself to create its own progressivist ideology by means of juxtaposition. Today, it seems that Central and Eastern Europe itself can be perceived as this 'Anti-Europe' if one perceives it in the category of "The Cold War". What is more, the media discourse more frequently uses the notion of "two-speed Europe", highlighting its division

3

Chapters: 7 – *Does Postsocialism in Eastern Europe Mirror Postcolonialism? The Legends of Revolution, Transition and Transformation after the Fall of the Berlin Wall*; 8 – *The Social Logic of Informality: The Rationale Underlying Personalized Relationships, Organisations and Coalitions – A Look at Southeast European and Mediterranean Societies*; 13 – *Modernization, Land Reforms and Ethnic Tensions: Scenarios in Central and Eastern Europe*; 14 – *Multiple Modernities in Bulgaria: Social Strategies of Capitalists Entrepreneurs in the Agrarian Sector*.

⁴ The author uses a hardly coherent and simplified interpretation of Central and Eastern Europe (calling it also the Eastern Bloc) as a historical and geographical region dominated by the four great imperial powers (Austria, Germany, Turkey and Russia) till the end of the First World War, and by the Soviet Union after the Second World War (till 1989). Therefore, in his deliberations, Central and Eastern Europe is composed by both Poland, Romania or Bulgaria, as well as former Yugoslavia and today's sovereign states established after its breakup.

⁵ Chapters: 1 – *Interdependent Diversities: Self-Representations, Historical Regions and Global Challenges in Europe*; 2 – *Dealing with the Past: The Mobilisation of History in European Societies*

into more (the so-called 'old' fifteen Member States) and less (13 states admitted to the European Union after 2004) developed parts.

The book includes many purely theoretical deliberations aimed at developing a proper set of analytical instruments to provide further clarification in relation to the specific character of the Old Continent. It also offers extensive empirical materials of exemplary nature subject to multifaceted juxtaposition to specify a common root of historical experiences of different countries. In his analysis, Giordano offers a combination of the perspective specific to history and the perspective of social science (Chapter 2.), simultaneously criticising the presentism typical of sociology. According to the author, social sciences too often look for the reasons for phenomena analysed in the context of the here and now; one valid example here could be social phenomenology.

Since the time of Kant, this erroneous and harmful cognitive perspective in the history of European thought has distinguished the historical method from the methods of social science. At the same time, it has required a revision when referring to a more anthropological view of history emphasising the continuity of the past things in the present. Giordano's ally here is Immanuel Wallerstein who, in his famous *Unthinking Social Science* postulates unification of the methods of perceiving social phenomena, including the historical and sociological perspectives once separated by the tradition of Enlightenment.

Taking both reference points into consideration – the attempt to specify the character of Central and Eastern Europe as an Anti-Europe, and the methodological settlement combining sociology and history – we have decided that our comments to the book by Giordano organise two theoretical paradigms: postcolonialism and the world-systems theory. Firstly, we would like to draw significant properties of Central and Eastern Europe out of his analysis, showing its half-peripheral character but mainly in the context of an unequal relationship between dominant and subordinate societies.

Second, the author himself indicates such possibilities of interpretation, while the example can provide bibliographical references to the books by Wallerstein (one of the main representatives of the world-systems theory), as well as several mentions of the postcolonial theory inside the book. Third, the social phenomenon of subordination is of a historical nature, being that peripheries are also areas demarcated by centuries of subordinate relationships. The historical perspective assumed by the author is related to world-systems theory and postcolonialism in the methodological sense,

as both paradigms refer to the assumption of Fernand Braudel concerning the existence of long-term historical structures. Indeed, it seems that, in his deliberations, Giordano shares the opinion of the founder of the *Annales* School who called for a discussion of civilisation transformations at a broadly-defined historical background.

Central and Eastern Europe as peripheries and half-peripheries

According to the famous world-systems theory by Immanuel Wallerstein (2007), economic phenomena should be discussed by using a unit of analysis not of a single state, but a complex structure of many subjects composing one system called a 'world system' by the author. One of the specific features of this system is an axial division of labour joining central and peripheral areas together. The exchange between the centre and peripheries is asymmetrical; the centre uses the peripheries as, for instance, its sales market or by maintaining low labour costs. Simultaneously, this serves as a relation of mutual dependence where the centre and peripheries need each other. The centre generates the elements of both cultural and economic domination. It imposes cultural patterns, political ideologies, ways of different institutions' functioning, and, most of all, profit from the fact of the existence of peripheries.

The centre is the most modern place in an individual world-system and that means it has got the most modern economic model and most developed mechanisms of generating innovations. In the context of the world-systems theory, researchers often discuss the problem of modernisation of peripheries which is generally imitative in this paradigm. Thus, its effects are not usually so spectacularly positive compared to the central areas (Leszczyński 2013), although it can still cause peripheries to develop. However, the modernisation only transforms them into half-peripheries; that is, the areas which, on one hand, aspire to being in the centre, while, on the other hand, are burden with many properties maintaining their peripheral character.

Having considered the afore-mentioned concept of Wallerstein, it is quite easy to notice that in the excerpts of Giordano's book dealing with the search for the specific properties of Central and Eastern Europe, the author focuses on discovering its peripheral nature. For instance, in Chapter 8, Giordano analyses the notion of informality, pondering over the functionality of informal relations for the specific types of societies. He indicates that this

type of social relations constitutes the society's answer to the institution of the state weakly rooted in the citizens' consciousness, a kind of means of adaptation in the face of no formal and imposed proceedings.

Giordano discusses societies of public distrust characterised by a value opposition of public and private spheres (the private is contrasted with a negative and harmful force of the public), along with morality telling one to put one's own and inner circle's interest first and ties of kinship as the foundations of community relations. On the other hand, Chapters 13 and 14 offer examples of imitative modernisation, they are also specific to peripheries and half-peripheries. In the former chapter, Giordano analyses the effects of accepting the agricultural reforms by different countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

He points out that the hidden agenda of these reforms was creating a national community by tying people to land and he interprets this process as a peripheral mutation of nationalisation of culturally backward societies through breakneck attempts to speed up modernisation as the result of extreme political decisions. What is more, the author suggests that the reforms have not contributed to achievement of social homogeneity at all; on the contrary, they have resulted in an increase in ethnic tensions. In the case of Poland, these were the most severe in Wołyń and Romania and within the areas of Transylvania. On the other hand, the reforms in Yugoslavia has brought about the improvement of agrarian infrastructure in poorer regions of the countries, while also resulting in the cultural antagonisms which came into play in the 90s of the 20th century.

Chapter 14 makes reference to the theoretical deliberations of Samuel Eisenstadt, a well-know sociologist of historical inclinations involved in the processes of civilisation development. Giordano analyses the latest transformations of the agricultural system in Bulgaria from the 90s of the last century, focusing readers' attention on the problem of the so-called *arendatori* – a group of new Bulgarian capitalists (farmers) often returning from the communist *nomenclature*. *Arendatori* leased land from the owners who got the land back.

As in the case of Romania analysed in Chapter 13, there has been a distortion of the original aim of the reform. Following its implementation, there was no actual distribution of wealth but a consolidation of the economic position of those who had been at the top of the social hierarchy in communist Bulgaria. Giordano not only shows the political mistakes here, but also

gives an example of imitative capitalism. The transition from a communist economy to a free market gave a possibility of growing wealthy. On the other hand, only those who managed to transfer their economic resources from the former system could make the most of this opportunity. Interestingly, the author indicates that the *arendatori* were very successful at establishing very profitable businesses, while having a positive impact on the development of their rural social environment, which seems to be another confirmation of the thesis that other capitalism in the conditions of peripheries is not possible.

To Giordano – referring to the perspective of the world-systems theory and advocating the combination of historical and sociological-anthropological views – the informality of social relations (specific to the countries of low social capital) and the imitative nature of modernisation clearly place Central and Eastern Europe within the peripheral areas. In this context, the case of Poland seems to be interesting being that it is sometimes considered a half-periphery⁶ for two distinct reasons. First, the Polish economy is competitive thanks to low wage costs. Ukrainian immigrants play an increasingly important part here with Ukraine becoming the periphery of Europe, characterised by a low level of innovation and providing Europe with cheap outsourcing services and intermediate products. Second, Poland is treated in the literature on the subject as a country which is simultaneously subordinate and dominant as half-peripheral⁷.

The context of subordination is related to three periods of its history – the 16th and 17th centuries, Partitions (1772-1918)⁸ and Eastern-bloc affiliation

⁶ Andrzej W. Nowak defines it as the area “...that is in decline, coming from around the centre or the one which would like to improve its position within the frameworks of the system. This is the buffer between the core and peripheries. Half-peripheries in the 16th century were Portugal, Spain and also Italy, southern Germany and southern France. Half-peripheries used peripheries, e.g. Spain and Portugal profited from their American colonies. However, they were used themselves too – the profits benefited England and northern France in exchange for highly-processed products (Nowak 2011: 128).

⁷ Traces of this proposed way of thinking can be found in the works by Wallerstein. Among the sources he used in the analyses are the works of Polish economic historians, with Marian Małowist and Witold Kula in the forefront. They described 16th and 17th century Poland as the country of strong economic dependence on Western Europe. These relations made Poland function as a periphery of the European world-system for a long time.

⁸ Between 1772 and 1795, the sovereign Poland ceased to exist because of the agreements concluded between its neighbours: Austria, Prussia and Russia (called the

(1945-1989) – and a lack of a strong body of the state stimulating economic development (imitative modernisation)⁹. On the other hand, the context of domination is related to a period of Polish history where Poles were invaders, hegemony and colonisers¹⁰.

Central and Eastern Europe as a postcolonial area

The other theoretical perspective offered by Christian Giordano for the analysis of social properties of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is postcolonialism. We consider this approach to be more apt than the analyses encountered in relation to transformative and transitological studies. He also refers to self-colonial processes (cf. the category of internal European colonialism, Domańska 2008: 162 after Hechter 1975). According to the perspectives offered here, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe abandoned the role of peripheries of Moscow at the turn of the 21st century and accepted the role of the peripheries of Brussels. They transformed a hegemon and submitted to 'subtler' political and cultural influence, as well as the economic expansion of Western companies regarding which the unstable Eastern economies of the beginning of the 90s were a paradise for businessmen. Therefore, Giordano discusses here what Ewa Thompson calls

partitioners), which divided up its territory among themselves. The state only came into being again in 1918.

⁹ According to the afore-mentioned Andrzej Nowak, "in Poland, where kings were losing their power to the gentry, there was no strong state created specific to the structures of the core, there was no strong administration, nor the army. What is more, Poland exported wheat to Western Europe. Landowners obtained great profits thanks to cheap and half-slave labour of peasants; the obtained wealth did not cause structural changes. The money was spent on imported luxury goods and services from the states of the centre. Cities were underdeveloped (apart from the Hansa beneficiaries – Gdańsk and Toruń)" (Nowak 2011: 127).

¹⁰ The Polish "postcolonial moment" is related to the question of the actions of the First Polish Republic (the 15th-18th centuries) within the area of Eastern Borderlands. The policy of the 17th century Polish gentry in today's Ukraine is now discussed by some as an example of the colonial policy (Sowa 2011). Even today there are traces of these relations found in the political discourse, mostly when Poland considers itself the centre in relation to some countries, positioning itself as a leader of Central and Eastern Europe in the European Union (Borkowski 2006, Fiut 2003).

a search for the “surrogate hegemon” (Thompson 2008: 114), and what is “despotism based on protectiveness” according to Izabella Bukraba-Rylska (Bukraba-Rylska 2004: 116). in Giordano’s opinion, these influences are still visible and were confirmed by the imposition financial solutions on the countries as Greece after the crisis of 2008¹¹.

The author refers to various types of discursive practices applied by interpreters of the hegemony and subordination relation. For instance, he claims that Euroscepticism can be called a peripheral social knowledge and not an irrational reaction to ‘wealth’ coming from the West, but an awareness of one’s peripheral subordination. This mainly involves interpretations presented by the power elites in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc characterised by a kind of *postcolonial mentality*¹², described by Tomasz Zarycki (2008a, 2008b, 2009) as follows:

1. Focusing on the centre as significantly foreign; this is the main point of reference in social debates, especially as a model of the forms, behaviour and lifestyles considered adequate for people aspiring to high social status. Thus, the extent to which a certain object, fashion, behaviour or person satisfies European standards, how close it is to the model.
2. A disability (inferiority) complex in relation to the centre is often compensated by comparison with the “inferior stranger”. In this case the “inferior stranger” for Poland, comparing itself with the European Union, can be other countries of the Eastern Bloc; for instance, Ukraine or Belarus.
3. A tendency to define political divisions and other disputes in the categories of relations with the centre (the centre’s opponents vs. supporters of cooperation with the centre) and “the level of cultural centrality”; that is, cultural assimilation of central standards and

¹¹ Let us add here that additional interpretation possibilities concerning the issue of the former countries of the Eastern Bloc’ dependency on the Western countries appear due to their membership to the European Union. One good example here is Poland and reactions of the EU authorities to political and legal changes after seizing power (2014) by the right-wing political party (*Totalna...* 2016).

¹² The notion offered by the authors of this article and not used by Christian Giordano.

agreement with them. For instance, there are pro-European and anti-European politicians.

4. Identity tensions, especially concerning peripheral elites, between a sense of belonging to the centre and to the peripheries. "It is therefore hard to find an identity compromise between being a European and a Pole" (Bielska & Lis 2013: 54).

Obviously, Christian Giordano is not the first researcher postulating the introduction of postcolonial consideration to the analysis of the properties of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This type of discourse had already appeared in the literature on the subject (see for instance Moore 2001, Cavanagh 2003, Thompson 2000) and not exclusively for Hungary or Bulgaria, which are willingly mentioned by the author, but also for Italy (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo 2012). In our opinion, the case of Poland is an even better example of the postcolonial status of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe because it was subject to intensive colonisation processes already in the period of Partitions, not only in the initiative of the Russian Empire but the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Fiut 2003: 152, Zarycki 2008a: 31-32).

Although they are referred to the most frequently, the postcolonial relations between the Soviet Union and Poland in the period of 1945-1989 cannot therefore be considered the only ones. Undoubtedly, only in the last decade of the 20th century, the Polish position in relation to the countries of the centre was improved thanks to commonly known events called the political system transformation (dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, implementation of the principles of a democratic state and market economy resulting in accession to NATO and the European Union). However, has this not also meant an automatic change of its geopolitical, economic and cultural status? Or was it only a leap from the peripheries to the afore-mentioned half-peripheries originally designed for the countries as Spain or Italy?

Let us emphasise that we are still developing this approach according to the principles of imitative modernisation; an approach not only indicated by Giordano (who, for instance, uses the "peripheries of Brussels" expression) but by other researchers¹³. We compete with the countries of the centre –

¹³ The postcolonial position of Poland has been analysed even more broadly, not only in reference to Brussels (see for instance Gandhi 2008, Bukraba-Rylska 2004, Cavanagh 2003, Thompson 2000).

taken more broadly and not only limited to the states of the European Union¹⁴ – mostly through low labour costs in a not particularly innovative economy, while providing mostly outsourcing services. The Polish political system transformation has been similar to other reforms of this type called a “structural adjustment”, to take the jargon of international institutions (Harvey 2008).

Final remarks

Christian Giordano’s book, limited to only several chapters for the purposes of our essay, will surely attract the attention of those readers who would like to take the broadest view possible when scrutinising different social phenomena in their sociological deliberations. Although we find many vague, overly general or too downright expressions – treated as evidence because of their obviousness, formulated without necessary references to research studies, at least opinion polls¹⁵ – it includes many interesting analytical clues facilitating the discussion (mostly theoretical but not deprived of empirical references, including the author’s own research) on the complicated problems of Central and Eastern Europe.

There are some additional reasons why the book deserves readers’ attention. It emphasises the need of historical perspectives in sociological studies, placing one’s own research in a broader context. Furthermore, it encourages the readers to conduct their own further analysis. For instance,

¹⁴ Apart from several most economically powerful countries of the world, with the United States in the forefront, there are also international institutions indicated, as, for instance, the International Monetary Fund. It played a significant part in the transformations of the 90s of the 20th century in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, pursuing the interest of mainly American financial circles.

¹⁵ For instance: *There appear to be no doubts on this point* (113), *We are all aware now* (114), *Currently, terms such as socialism [...] are ideologically and politically convenient words* (116), *Politicians and social scientist experts are still talking about* (117), *No one in Eastern Europe harbours illusions about the current peripheral status of their country. [...] There is a growing awareness...* (118). It is also hard to agree with the statement that *people’s revolutions are usually subject to a top-down control* (112). This blunt thesis is not that obvious from the perspective of social movement theory.

when the author extends the interpretation area of the problems of Central and Eastern Europe by the postcolonial perspective, there remains the question of how to measure the relationships we have discussed. Perhaps an interesting indicator of their extent and direction would be migration flows as these not only concern the movement of people from Africa to the countries of Western Europe but – and especially – the migration flows to the states admitted to the EU after 2004 from the countries of the former Eastern Bloc and former Soviet republics, which are not members of the European Union. The assumption here is therefore that the peripherisation or postcolonial perspective in this type of studies would certainly bring many interesting discoveries, especially in the context of the problems that Central and Eastern Europe seems to be causing Europe.

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