Relational debris: Notes toward a Research Methodology of Postness

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Abstract

Drawing on long-term qualitative research with migrants in Britain, the contribution explores the methodological possibilities of "postness" as a subjective sense of aftermath that highlights the relational quality of individual encounters with postsocialist and postcolonial conjunctures. It explores the conjuncture of Brexit Britain as a specific site of such encounters, where debates about the role of postcolonial melancholia (Gilroy 2004) in nativist nationalism and anti-migrant hostilities find their echo in the material presence of (post)colonial artefacts and objects. At the same time, the intertwining of migratory routes presents an opportunity to reflect on multiple geographies of postness, including the ways in which postsocialist aftermath invokes, resonates with, or differs from legacies of colonialism, and the possibilities for alternative affective orientations toward remnants of the past. The article thus proposes an attunement to relational debris as a means of capturing multi-vocal experiences of postness beyond the East-West and North-South binaries.

Keywords: postness, migrant encounters, postsocialism, postcolonialism, Britain

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1. Researching postsocialist and postcolonial conjunctures in the British diaspora space

Responding to the special issue's call for further empirical engagement across postsocialist and postcolonial geographies, this contribution reflects on the methodological possibilities of "postness" as a shared but not commensurate sense of aftermath that creates an alternative perspective on postsocialist and postcolonial convergences. I draw on several years' worth of ethnographic and interview-based research with migrants living in Britain to highlight the ways in which the "posts", often approached as theoretical frameworks or through historical periodisation, can also assume the form of tangible and affective remnants. By focusing on situated individual encounters with objects and their re-narration in the context of research conversations, this contribution homes in on the micro-textured "dialogues" that may be missed by larger-scale approaches to postsocialist and postcolonial conjunctures. It further argues for the methodological significance of the affect of encounter – particularly the unanticipated encounter as a turning point for subjective understandings of aftermath – for mapping out both the diversity and interconnectedness of "postsocialism" and "postcolonialism". By tracing how individuals conceive and narrate these interconnections, the paper shows that "thinking between the posts" (Chari & Verdery 2009) is not only the task of the researcher but also the everyday practice of migrants making sense of the past in the present.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the analytical inadequacy or epistemic coloniality of postsocialism as a concept (Gawlewicz, 2020; Kołodziejczyk & Șandru, 2012; Müller, 2019), and the question of its usage in relation to postcolonialism – (how) are the "posts" the same, do they imply a direct equivalence between colonialism and socialism, what are the political and theoretical repercussions of comparison — continue to haunt (Lazarus 2012) oversimplified accounts of their convergences. In what follows I make no particular argument for the continued saliency of the term "postsocialism" to describe the vast array of experiences, socioeconomic formations, and political agendas across the poorly

defined region once known as the Second World. However, as references to "colonialism" or "Empire" always carry a political charge when deployed in public speech or everyday conversation, precisely due to their historic absences in formerly colonising societies, researchers should remain alert to the situations in which references to "socialism" or "communism" arise in non-academic contexts. As my research with migrants from Central-East Europe in Britain highlights, references to the socialist/communist past may signal a particular value-based orientation toward past political regimes; but just as often, they shed light on more ambiguous relations that may not necessarily add up to "postsocialism", but that nevertheless express a condition of postness.

Based on two consecutive qualitative research projects investigating diasporic intergenerational memories of former Yugoslavia (2012-2016) and Central-East European migrants' articulations of race and geopolitical coevalness (2017-2020) respectively, this contribution reflects on selected vignettes to show how material encounters with the remnants of the past give socialism and colonialism new contours, both in relation to each other and to contemporary scenes of encounter. In using the term "remnant", I am nodding to Ann Laura Stoler's meditation on "imperial debris", in which Stoler highlights the inadequacy of a postcolonial analysis that fails to distinguish "between what holds and what lies dormant, between residue and recomposition, between a weak and a tenacious trace", drawing our attention to the fact that by themselves, terms such as "colonial legacy" lack precision and "do little to account for the contemporary force of imperial remains, what people count as remains, and as importantly what they do with them" (Stoler, 2008, p.196). What people count as remains and the meanings they attach to them are central to my own concern with postness. I am not suggesting, however, that the concepts of "debris", "remnants", or "ruins" represent a directly comparative lens for comprehending the postcolonial and postsocialist present. This would miss the finer points of Stoler's argument that remnants are always dislocated and never wholly transparent, as well as implying an analytical equivalence between two relationships of "duress" (2008, p.192).

Instead, I am making two interrelated methodological points: first, that by training our gaze on located encounters in places such as West London flea markets and Sofia apartment blocks, we can glean textured detail about the lived experiences of how historical "legacies" permeate the present; and second, that such encounters and their re-narrations are always relational, sited in multi-nodal geographical connections beyond the East-West and North-South binaries.

I therefore approach the two "posts" examined by the special issue with deliberate methodological laxity, neither as (solely) temporal categories that produce crisp historical periodisation nor as analogous politico-theoretical constructs, but rather as intersecting embodied forms of knowledge that are capable of, although never certain to do so, relating present-day material encounters to a subjective sense of aftermath. Far from sidestepping the rich body of scholarship examining both the opportunities and contradictions of postsocialist and postcolonial dialogues, conjunctures, or conditions (Koobak, Tlostanova, & Thapar-Björkert 2021; Manolova, Kušić, & Lottholz 2019; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, & Koobak 2016), my suggestion is that the methodology's efficacy lies precisely in not knowing in advance what shape the "dialogue" in question will take. I am championing a grounded attunement to postness, in this case applied to long-term ethnographic and interview-based research, which avoids anticipating specific analogies or comparisons between postsocialism and postcolonialism where interlocutors do not seek to draw them, even or precisely when asked to reflect on histories of colonialism and socialism, and which, where such analogies do emerge, avoids jumping to conclusions about their contours. Instead, it seeks to remain alert to how migrant trajectories bring diverse instances of postness into sharper view through their unanticipated encounters with the evidence of aftermath – in this case, the "less dramatic durabilities" (Stoler, 2008, p.192) represented by material objects such as refurbished chairs, African masks, safari hats, and building facades – and the range of affective and political relationships that such encounters evoke.

Scenes of encounter necessarily differ, and I locate mine in the specific conjuncture of the (mid-)Brexit diaspora space of Britain.

The temporal coordinate is supported by the glut of research positioning Brexit, and the resurgence of racialized nationalism with which it is associated, as an emblematic example of Paul Gilroy's "postcolonial melancholia" (Koegler, Malreddy, & Tronicke, 2020; Meghji, 2020; Valluvan & Kalra, 2019), which evidences the continued presenting of Britain's colonial and imperial "inheritance" (Saunders, 2020). My analysis also owes much to Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space", as a category "'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as "indigenous" (1996, p.209). While Brah's work has inspired both numerous studies of specific diaspora spaces and theoretical interventions aimed at unsettling the logics of strangerhood and cohesive national belonging (see for example Ahmed, 2000; Gedalof, 2012), the relevance of diaspora space to my own research lies in Brah's insight that we should remain alive to "the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (1996, p.209), as such embodied genealogies come to challenge the geographical limits of both postsocialism and postcolonialism.

Given the wealth of Anglophone scholarship on Britain and the outsized place this small island occupies in the geopolitical imagination, it would be tempting to stage this analysis elsewhere. However, I see privileging the viewpoints of migrants and "internal others" (Virdee & McGeever, 2018), particularly on questions that are not generally assumed to be within their remit (Drnovšek Zorko, 2020), as constituting an alternative means of de-centring predominant narratives about which histories count, how they shape contemporary political and social relations, and who has the right to voice them. It also draws attention to migrant perspectives on both socialism and (British) colonialism, considerations that are often left out of the scholarship on migration from the Central-East European region (Drnovšek Zorko, 2019). It is these migrant perspectives to which I now turn.

2. Artefacts of postness: Daniela

I first met Daniela(~) at a public event I had co-organised with a Birmingham-based community organisation, during a week in

early 2019 when the UK parliament was due to ratify the Brexit withdrawal agreement. Part of a longer event series exploring the connections between (post)socialist Central-East Europe and contemporary UK, the event invited speakers' and audience members' reflections on thinking about "2019 after 1989". Here Brexit inevitably featured as a milestone that would soon come to re-arrange Central-East Europeans' conditions for inclusion. In truth, the "would" seems misplaced; the temporality of Brexit felt more diffuse and difficult to pinpoint, exemplified by the fact that the key parliamentary vote had been deferred yet again only days before the event. By then everyone in the room had already undergone three years of post-referendum political wrangling, as well as a much longer period of creeping immigration restrictions and hostility aimed not only or even predominantly at EU nationals, but at a much broader collective of presumed racial and cultural outsiders.

Several weeks later, still marinating in this period of political transience, Daniela and I met in central London for a coffee and an interview. Daniela, in her early thirties, had moved there from Poland about a year and a half previously. When I asked her about her relationship to communism as someone who had grown up in Poland in the 1990s, Daniela responded that in her family they had "never put too much attention to [communism]", though she referred to the everyday traces it had left on her parents: from their love of "cool sweets" to her father's aversion to wearing the colour navy due to its associations with uniforms. While Daniela felt she should perhaps pay more attention to this aspect of "the heritage of [her] nation", she had never been "sentimental" about the period, and contrasted her stance with that of a friend who collects objects from communist times. This led to a conversation about the popularity of such objects in Poland, in which the concept of remnants occupies a significant role:

D: Interior design in Poland, usually you're going to take those chairs from the 70s and 60s, restore it, put a new material on it. You can [then] make the whole interior in the modern, post-communist way, which I never got. And I was asking myself, "Why is that?" Then I found an answer, I think.

[It's] because contemporary design is so much more expensive. So they find a way how to use...

ŠDZ: The stuff that's already there.

D: ... the stuff that's already there, to refresh it, and somehow turn it into fashion.

ŠDZ: So it's necessity that's driving this invention?

D: It is necessity but also a pleasant, sustainable movement. … It's just, it cannot be like every single person in Poland wants to have these post-communism things in their houses and they really adore it. Though it's just a fashion, there is a reason why this fashion is there.

Daniela narrates the chairs' repurposing into a design aesthetic as a practice born from the sheer ubiquity of such artefacts, an explanation that easily co-exists with other motivations such as sustainability, thrift, or a consumerist nostalgic fad (Menke & Schwarzenegger, 2016). Viewed as the physical detritus of Polish communism, the objects seem emptied of overpowering affect. True, Daniela finds the chairs ugly, and thus reasons that she cannot possibly be alone in not being "sentimental" about "these post-communism things". Yet their popularity is easily explicable as a re-purposing of what is already there: like Daniela's father's aversion to the colour navy, they are evidence of both a national and family "heritage", neither over-burdened with political agency nor unusual in their ordinariness.

I stress this point due to the notable contrast with the following exchange, when our conversation moved on to Daniela's personal associations with the topic of British colonialism. Daniela told me about her "[only] experience related to colonialism" after coming to London, a story in which material objects are not only evidence of the past but exert a powerful contemporary presence:

D: [With] my friend … we went to the huge flea market located in Richmond. … And then I actually saw what people are selling there. These are the people who are just collecting stuff from their house they don't need anymore. So there are antiques, and you can get real, real postcolonial shit there. There is everything. And I was quite terrified that …

That gave me somehow the ... 'insider view' is maybe too much, but there was something really genuine about it. These people, their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, were colonisers. Yes, they have it in their houses, because it is their family heritage in a way.

ŠDZ: What kind of objects were there?

D: Jesus, I don't remember, but I'm more than sure that there were some African totems, quite a lot of them. A lot of things from leather. Some quite, quite exotic furniture. … Of course the hats, lots of hats, these safari-like hats.

ŠDZ: The sort of hat that you think of when you think of ...?

D: Yeah, yeah. I'm not sure if any rifles or guns, but music instruments, everything you can imagine in the old school British tenure, I guess. Like when I'm gonna go to British Museum ... Basically, you could pick some of the stuff and see it in this flea market, which was quite... Yeah.

ŠDZ: Precisely because it is ordinary people, right? And their attics.

D: Yeah. They... are your neighbours, you know? … Brexit voters, for example, or not Brexit voters, you never know. These are those people, you know?

ŠDZ: Do you think there is something of that colonial mindset in Brexit voters?

D: 100%, yeah.

Unlike the restored chairs, the "postcolonial" objects in the flea market embody the sheer force of history in the present. Moreover, for Daniela their "terror"-inducing impact lies in what they reveal to her about the intimacy between British colonialism and the everyday: they are not merely traces, but clues. Far from being confined to imperial institutions like the British Museum, at the flea market the objects become material evidence of colonialism as a "family" as well as a "national" heritage, a relationship that Daniela took for granted in her own family's relationship to Polish communism. It is the unexpected discovery of this intimacy, and the objects' resulting "genuineness" in the context of the flea

market, that gives the artefacts their agentive force, joining up with the "colonial" everydayness of Brexit. The power of the juxtaposition therefore lies not in direct comparisons between the legacies of Polish communism and British colonialism, but rather in the meanings assigned to their respective debris in the present.

3. Scenes of aftermath: Amelia

Like Daniela, Amelia and I first met in 2019 at an event organised by a migrant rights organisation. Kenyan-born Amelia was active in the anti-Brexit movement, attending political protests and closely following legislative attempts to thwart what had come to be known as a "hard Brexit". Amelia had also been in a romantic relationship with a Bulgarian man for a number of years and was interested in the subject of my research. We met up several times for walks in London, as well as an interview that stretched over two long afternoons. After our first session, Amelia made a reference to her first trip to Bulgaria in the mid-2000s and her initial impression of Sofia was of a place that had been emptied out of spirit, a place where, in her words, "something had happened". She felt unable to put precise words to the "feel of the place", but told me that this feeling then became her association with "communism", replacing her earlier, more abstract idea of what the word meant. In some ways, said Amelia, this initial impression reminded her of the feeling one gets in large slums. But no, she corrected herself, even African slums aren't quite like that; it reminded her of parts of the US suffering from post-industrial decline.

The idea of a "something happened here" place stuck with me, and the next time we met, I invited Amelia to expand on this impression:

> Sofia has lots of Stalinist blocks, and a lot of them are, well, if not in a dilapidated state – they still have a lot of graffiti, they haven't been repainted, so they do look a bit dingy. The first time I went there I [thought] "Oh my God, what happened in this place?" And it felt like entering a place where… there's just been a lot of negative things happening. I'm sorry, I don't have the right word for it, but

> I'll just talk about how it felt. … It's almost like there's some foreboding, a bit of darkness, but a lot of depression as well. And that for me was very interesting because I had never been to a city where I'd got that kind of feeling. … It was also maybe in a way seeing some of the poverty.

While Amelia found that she could relate some of "the poverty aspect" to past trips she had taken to certain rural parts of Africa, or even specific city neighbourhoods, she mused on the unexpectedness posed by the fact that "this is still Europe". The reality of Sofia contrasted with her experience of Western European cities like Paris, but also of her hometown Nairobi: "It's just coming from Nairobi, where you have lots of more dense skyscrapers… and beautiful modern buildings".

Like her earlier comment that the emptiness she felt in Sofia reminded her of post-industrial US landscapes, this comparison subverts potential expectations about "postcolonial Africa" being the most apt analogy for the aftermath of communism evoked by the crumbling socialist blocks. Amelia's inarticulable sense of "something happened here" further illustrates the methodological possibilities of postness, which, much like Daniela's reaction to the flea market, evinces unexpected glimpses into a past that had previously seemed divorced from the ordinary present, but which is now revealed through encounters with material evidence of aftermath.

Amelia's visit to Sofia, however, yielded a further juxtaposition with her expectations about "Europe", which conjured a different aspect of socialist postness:

> [Entering] the building, and it's a tall building, you take the old lifts that go cranking up, up, up. And then it stops and then you have to push the door, because they don't open automatically. But when we got to their flat… [In] the living room his mum has African masks on the wall, and to me it felt like I could have entered the living room of one of my aunties or relatives. … Later I did ask "how come you have all these masks and where are they from?" Then [his mother] explained that she thought they might be from Nigeria. My partner's granddad … and his dad… was an

engineer. [His] granddad used to travel a lot, and this was during the communist days. So his grandparents were some of the few people who [were] lucky to be able to live and work abroad, in Libya and other places. And because his mum likes art and crafts… every time the dad would travel he'd bring a mask for her… And, to me, I don't know, it made me feel nice and warm.

The positive feelings invoked by the African masks encountered inside this derelict building provided for Amelia the sense of familiarity that had been missing from her initial impression of Sofia. But their presence is also material evidence of another facet of communism, namely the "alternative globalisation" (Mark, Kalinovsky & Marung, 2020) that saw some "few people" in Bulgaria benefit from state-sponsored exchanges with the postcolonial world. The affective resonance of the Nigerian masks has little in common with the "African totems" that Daniela described seeing at the London flea market, despite the shared ordinariness of their presence in people's flats and attics. While the masks do not necessarily soften the impact of Amelia's first impression of Sofia, they represent a less alienating and less violent postness, which, through its alternative circuits, bypasses Britain as the primary site of encounter between postsocialist and postcolonial genealogies. Notably, what Daniela's and Amelia's stories have in common is a triangular relation between the East, West, and South, where postsocialist debris sheds new light on the meaning of Europeanness for a Kenyan woman living in London while the material evidence of colonial intimacies forces a Polish woman to reconsider her British neighbours' political leanings. In this way, their experiences open up an opportunity to re-evaluate the meanings of postsocialism and postcolonialism not only for those who can claim these conditions as "their" national or family heritage, but also those who are able to locate them in relation to their own experiences of aftermath.

In highlighting the diversity of such relations, I have sought to bring into view the methodological possibilities of subjective understandings of postness as a site of convergence between postsocialism and postcolonialism. This methodological leaning does not dictate the forms of comparison but rather exists at an

intersection between historical traces, or what we might term relational debris. By setting aside any expectations about the content of such "dialogues between the posts", researchers may find a wealth of encounters that reveal how the past is deemed to act upon the present. I have further stressed the importance of being attuned to the affects of intimacy, alienation, or agency that material objects and artefacts evoke within local encounters with socialist and colonial pasts, and particularly the significance of the unexpected in their re-narrations within the research setting. As multiple geographies of postness intersect and encounter each other in the diaspora space as "genealogies of dispersion [and] of staying put" (Brah, 1996, p.209), we need to take seriously the contexts in which such encounters take place, including, in this case, the spatiotemporal conjuncture of (mid-)Brexit Britain. This produces not only the conditions for investigating situated dialogues, but also potential opportunities for privileging migrants' responses to the selective deployment of historical legacies.

Acknowledgments

End Notes

(~) – All names used are pseudonyms

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