

# Epistemological, critical and reflexive gymnastics: constructing research in "former Yugoslavia" in the face of the coloniality of knowledge

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In order to expose and undercut this reinscription of otherness, research on East-Central Europe should engage with postcolonial theory<sup>2</sup>.

In 2004, Merje Kuus, an Estonian geographer based in Canada, invited researchers working on the process of enlargement of the European Union (EU) (then towards Central and Eastern Europe) to integrate the contributions of post-colonial theory into their reflections. This article aims to highlight the relevance and timeliness of such an assertion for someone who started, as was my case in 2008, a thesis on the pre-accession policy at the Serbia/Croatia border, at the price, however, of some "updates". The first is of a spatial nature: the countries concerned by enlargement are almost all located in south-eastern Europe today. They belong to a geographical group that the EU names *Western Balkans*.<sup>3</sup> These are the new territories of European expansion. The second is of a theoretical nature: decolonial thought has come, during the last decade, to supplement the contributions of post-colonial theory. Among its main contributions, we note the criticism of the hegemonic attitude of the West, including its thinkers, towards the non-West, and particularly its periphery and semi-periphery<sup>4</sup>.

This point of departure constitutes a statement of position, that of considering that research work "is subject to the relations of knowledge and power that have a history", but also reflects an intention: "rather than evading them, we must try to understand them, and, for example, to question the very conditions that make an ethnography conducted far from home possible today"<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the arrangements of my entry into

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank both readers of this article, Capucine Boidin and Emmanuelle Huver, for their stimulating and constructive comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Gerald Taylor Aiken, Denis Martouzet and Simon Laflamme for their careful review.

<sup>2</sup> Merje Kuus, "Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe", *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 28, no 4, 2004, p. 472.

<sup>3</sup> It is under this name that the EU brings together the states that emerged from the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia plus Albania; countries which, since the Feira European Council in 2000, have been the subject of a special scheme whereby the EU is committed to helping them to become future members. For more details, see Cyril Blondel, "La coopération transfrontalière, un levier potentiel des réconciliations interethniques en ex-Yougoslavie ? Une approche critique," *Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography*, 641, 2013, <https://cybergeo.revues.org/25881>.

<sup>4</sup> Madina Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference", *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, vol. 1, no 2, 2015, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Here I am extending the reflection led by Didier Fassin, in the disciplinary framework of anthropology and sociology, to the research carried out in my thesis, presented in spatial planning and urban planning. See: Didier Fassin, "Répondre à sa recherche. L'anthropologue face à ses "autres" », in Didier Fassin and Alban Bensa (dir.), *Les politiques de l'enquête*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008, p. 318.

the world of the Serbia/Croatia border are at the same time part of these socio-spatial relations and the developing agent which allows me to try to apprehend and understand them<sup>6</sup>. If I paraphrase Didier Fassin, critical analysis<sup>7</sup> of the ethnographic situation - as the historical and geopolitical stage where the encounter between the researcher and his interlocutors - and the ethnographic relationship - as an unequal relationship, in both directions, which is formed between the investigator and the respondent - then constitutes what makes knowledge in social sciences and spatial sciences possible<sup>8</sup>. This is precisely the purpose of this article: to return to the epistemological and political stakes posed by my research. It is a question here more particularly of updating the issues raised and the difficulties encountered in delimiting the subject, temporally, historically and territorially<sup>9</sup>.

The question posed in my thesis work, that of the developments and persistences of the socio-spatial relations on the border between the two nation states, was strongly marked by the political context of pre-accession to the EU. The latter enjoins the two countries and the two peoples to reconcile by cooperating (and cooperate by reconciling). This framework influences the way in which the issue of enlargement is historically, geographically and normatively posed, by cultural producers in general (researchers, journalists, politicians)<sup>10</sup>, and by me in particular. The post-Yugoslav space<sup>11</sup> is indeed treated as a separate sub-field, governed by specific themes. This trend is perpetuated by institutional funding and research strategies in which academics are directed to (and choose to<sup>12</sup>) enrol<sup>13</sup>.

When we focus on the theses concerning the region submitted to French universities since 2005, in addition to their mainly subject-area registration in the field of law and political science<sup>14</sup>, we note a concentration of subjects on two sometimes related fields: (1) nationalisms, conflicts and their consequences, international justice; (2) European enlargement, its mechanisms, challenges and effects<sup>15</sup>. This reveals the dual perspective (problem/solution) and dominant view of the region. On the one hand, it is approached according to the potential danger that it would continue to represent for peace in Europe. On the other hand, we measure if and how it manages to normalise itself, to become Europeanized<sup>16</sup>. One wonders to what extent this reading really contributes to the understanding of the socio-spatial and political phenomena that are currently at work, and to what extent it does not contribute rather, or at least at the same time, to perpetuating them. Might not this portrait be reductive, and does it not say at least as

<sup>6</sup> Edith Gaillard, *Habiter autrement : des squats féministes en France et en Allemagne. Une remise en question de l'ordre social*, doctoral thesis, Tours, Université François-Rabelais, 2013, p. 96

<sup>7</sup> The use of the term critical refers to the set of theories in the social sciences that aims to provide a basis for social criticism to better understand the processes of domination of the human being and fight against them. For more details on its mobilisation in the context of the so-called "post-Yugoslav" space, see Cyril Blondel, Guillaume Javourez and Marie van Effenterre, "Avantpropos. Habiter l'espace post-yougoslave", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, vol. 46, no 4, 2015, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Didier Fassin, "Introduction. L'inquiétude ethnographique", in Didier Fassin and Alban Bensa (dir.), *Les politiques de l'enquête*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> And less of discussing the relationships of power and knowledge that have emerged, both during and after the ethnographic survey itself (related for example to my gender, class, age, sexuality or nationality characteristics). For clarity and convenience, this aspect is left out here. This debate is nonetheless conducted in Chapter 4 of my thesis (see Cyril Blondel, *Aménager les frontières des périphéries européennes : la frontière Serbie/ Croatie à l'épreuve des injonctions à la coopération et à la réconciliation*, doctoral thesis, Tours, Université François Rabelais, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> In the sense of Loïc Wacquant (see Loïc Wacquant, "La stigmatisation territoriale à l'âge de la marginalité avancée", *Fermentum*, no 48, 2007, p15-29; Loïc Wacquant, Tom Slater and Virgílio Borges Pereira, "Territorial Stigmatization in Action", *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 46, 2014, pp 1270 -1280).

<sup>11</sup> I will return a little later in this article on my use of "post-Yugoslav" and its limits.

<sup>12</sup> My thesis is an illustration. The only financial support I received (for my fieldwork) came from the doctoral support program of the IHEDN (French Institute of Advanced Studies in National Defence). The success of my selection was apparently related to my ability to demonstrate how the stabilisation and pacification of the region as a whole (including the Serbia/Croatia border) represented a security issue for Europe in general (advice received prior to submitting my dossier).

<sup>13</sup> Stef Jansen, *Yearnings in the Meantime: "Normal Lives" and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*, Oxford, New York, Berghahn Books, 2015, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Fifty-six of the one hundred and twelve thesis subjects with the word Yugoslavia or Yugoslavia in them between 2005 and 2015 are in these two disciplines. Similar trends are observed for the entries "Serbia", "Croatia" and "Bosnia", see [www.theses.fr](http://www.theses.fr)

<sup>15</sup> Cyril Blondel, Guillaume Javourez and Marie van Effenterre, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

much about the phenomenon observed (post-yugoslav changes) as about those who produce it (and especially about us, the researchers, and more broadly about the academic situation)? What then are the main epistemological<sup>17</sup> and political questions posed by the ethnographic situation - that is, by the relationship between the researcher and his or her fieldwork?

To answer this question, I will return to three dominant ways of approaching this kind and this type of questioning in social science research: (1) through nationalisms, (2) through post-socialism, (3) through the post-Yugoslav paradigm. This is not to question here the fact that researchers have an angle of approach, a bias. I share the point of view of Žižek: any position is ideological<sup>18</sup>. The idea here is rather to discuss the limits of the dominant approaches in the particular case of my thesis, by trying to identify as much the postulates on which they rest as the blind spots that they produce. In this way, my goal is to contribute to a broader and more general reflection on the conditions for producing knowledge and the validity/relativity of knowledge. I will then address, in a final part (4), a less conventional approach, the decolonial option, what it brought me in the context of the thesis, but also its significant contribution to the reflections on research into research.

## 1. Escaping methodological nationalisms

As we have seen, the post-Yugoslav space is today most often tackled through its nationalisms, that is to say, by postulating these as social and spatial facts, if not unique, at least the first. However, this angle of approach can be a cognitive trap: faced with the challenge of observing nationalism in the field, the researcher often comes to nationalise his or her view, which is commonly called methodological nationalism. It was against the danger of the nationalist reduction of my view of the Serbia/Croatia border situation that I first conceived my approach in the field.

As Speranta Dumitru reminds us, the critique of methodological nationalism is indeed an epistemological question, in the sense that it is "neither to defend nor to represent globalisation, the collapse of the nation-state<sup>19</sup>, or borders", but to raise "a question of methodology of social science research<sup>20</sup>". According to her, we find mainly three forms.

The first, "stato-centrist" nationalism, leads to granting an unjustified pre-eminence to the nation-state, whether in social or political analysis<sup>21</sup>; as if law and social ideals were only defined by the state and existed only through it<sup>22</sup>. Without denying the influence of national variables, it is appropriate instead to make them into one variable among others - along with Europe and local [variables] in particular - in the analysis of the creation of the border<sup>23</sup>. "Among others" means that it is equally important not to fall into a locked-in approach on other scales. Although less frequent, the risk of excessive European or localistic tropism would also be problematic<sup>24</sup>. The border reconfigurations (in the case of my thesis, Serbo-Croat) do not operate exclusively on these two scales either; besides, "the use of internal/external and

<sup>17</sup> In the three dimensions identified by Jean-Louis Le Moigne, namely the epistemology of gnosiology, on the nature of knowledge; methodological epistemology, on the constitution of knowledge; and ethical epistemology, about the value or validity of knowledge (see Jean-Louis Le Moigne, *Les épistémologies constructivistes*, Paris, coll. "Que sais-je?", 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology", in Slavoj Žižek (dir.), *Mapping Ideology*, London, New York, Verso, 1994, pp. 1-33.

<sup>19</sup> Or the recomposition of one's action (see Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces. Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Speranta Dumitru, "Qu'est-ce que le nationalisme méthodologique? Essai de typologie", *Raisons politiques*, vol. 2, no 54, p. 2, 2014, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Pouvoir et contre-pouvoir à l'ère de la mondialisation*, Paris, Flammarion, 2003, p. 62

<sup>22</sup> Speranta Dumitru, *op. cit.*, p. 19

<sup>23</sup> Romain Pasquier, "Comparer les espaces régionaux : stratégie de recherche et mise à distance du nationalisme méthodologique", *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 19, no 2, 2012, p. 64

<sup>24</sup> Because to think of the EU as a form of super-state amounts to reproducing the limits of stato-centrism: "Institutions of global governance are not simply replicating on a bigger scale the functions and tasks of the nation-state" (James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality", *American Ethnologist*, vol. 29, no 4, 2002, p. 996). All translations from English are by the author.

national/international polarities served to hide the interaction between processes taking place on different scales<sup>25</sup>. Thus, avoiding stato-centrism requires thinking on different scales, but above all, grasping what is happening between scales.

The second form is that of methodological nationalism, called "groupist" in reference to Rogers Brubaker; it consists in understanding (and reducing) society to that of a nation-state<sup>26</sup>. Specifically, distinct presupposed groups, clearly differentiated, internally homogeneous, and delineated externally, are considered as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflict and fundamental units of social analysis<sup>27</sup>. This tendency is frequent in the study of national, racial and ethnic conflicts; especially when we talk about Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia by reifying them as substantial entities to which interests and *agencies*<sup>28</sup> (in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu) can be attributed<sup>29</sup>. In the case of my thesis work, becoming detached from "groupism" has required consideration of ethnic belonging as non-homogeneous and not exclusively Serbian or Croatian and social affiliations as not exclusively ethnic and national<sup>30</sup>. Once again, it is a question, without abandoning it, of not giving too much importance a priori to the ethnic analytical model, of make it one among others according to what individuals mention.<sup>31</sup>

The third form of methodological nationalism that was identified is termed "territorialist". It comes down to "understanding space as naturally divided into national territories<sup>32</sup>". In the analysis, such a perception leads to formulating concepts, asking questions, constructing hypotheses, collecting and interpreting evidence, drawing conclusions in a spatial framework that is completely territorialised<sup>33</sup>. This is what many authors have called the "territorial trap<sup>34</sup>". In the same way as "groupism" at the social level, this tendency leads to the reification of "state territories into given or fixed units of sovereign space", which is equivalent to "dehistoricising and decontextualising the processes of the creation and disintegration of States"<sup>35</sup>. In the case of my research, trying to avoid the territorial trap led me to think of the Serbia/Croatia border in other ways (e.g. spatial and reticular). This leads to an attempt to avoid the confinement of field work, as much as analysis, in the cross-border territory, as defined and prescribed by the European programme for cross-border cooperation 2007-2013. It was also a matter of monitoring the observation of the border and the projects organised around it outside of the territorial frameworks and a pre-imposed lockstep.

Dumitru rightly points out that almost no research avoids the three forms of methodological nationalism, especially as they are articulated. Indeed, the idea of the state refers to a certain form of verticality, in social and territorial interlocking. James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta perfectly summarise the logic: Verticality refers to the central and pervasive idea of the state as an institution somehow "above" civil society, community and family. [...] The second image is that of encompassment: Here the state (conceptually fused with the nation) is located within an ever-widening series of circles that begins with family and local community and ends with the system of nation-states. This is profoundly consequential understanding of scale, one in which the locality encompassed by the region, the region by the nation-state and the nation-state by the international community. These two metaphors work together to produce a taken-for-granted spatial and scalar image of a state that both sits above and contains its localities,

<sup>25</sup> John A. Agnew, "Le piège territorial. Les présupposés géographiques de la théorie des relations internationales", *Raisons politiques*, vol. 2, no 54, 2014, p. 30

<sup>26</sup> Speranta Dumitru, *op. cit.*, p. 22

<sup>27</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups", *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 4, no 2, 2002, p. 164

<sup>28</sup> Brubaker talks about agency, referring to Bourdieu's work, particularly Pierre Bourdieu, Harvard University Press, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, 1991

<sup>29</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> But also linked, in an intersectional way, to gender, social class, age, for example.

<sup>31</sup> Brubaker advises focusing more on categories as they are mobilised on a daily basis, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, what is "common sense", routines and organisational resources, discursive figures, institutionalised forms, political projects, the contingent and variable way of "grouping together" (Rogers Brubaker, *op. cit.*, at 186).

<sup>32</sup> Speranta Dumitru, *op. cit.*, p. 22

<sup>33</sup> See Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> On this subject, see in particular: John A. Agnew, *op. cit.*; Costis Hadjimichalis and Ray Hudson "Rethinking Local and Regional Development: Implications for Radical Political Practice in Europe", *European Urban and Regional Studies*, vol. 14, no 2, 2007, p. 99- 113

<sup>35</sup> John A. Agnew, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

regions and communities<sup>36</sup>.

In my thesis work, to avoid methodological nationalisms, I tried, as much as possible, to approach the border phenomenon not as an interstate process (between Serbian and Croatian states), inter-national (between Serbian and Croatian "peoples"), or even inter-territorial (between a nesting of Serb territories and a nesting of Croatian territories), but as a socio-spatial configuration (in its daily routine and by the injunction to cooperate) which challenges precisely all these categories. The challenge was to take into account the relationship as much as the disconnect between space and scale<sup>37</sup>, i.e. the transnational character of both the state and the local<sup>38</sup>, without falling into the "methodological fluidism":

While it is important to push aside the blinders of methodological nationalism, it is just as important to remember the continued potency of nationalism. Framing the world as a global marketplace cannot begin to explain why under specific circumstances not only political entrepreneurs, but also the poor and disempowered [...] continue to frame their demands for social justice and equality within a nationalist rhetoric<sup>39</sup>.

More than the (post-Yugoslav) states themselves, it is the ideologies attached to them that were at the centre of my attention. Does the ideology of reconciliation replace nationalist ideologies, strengthen them or accommodate them? The objective was to try to better apprehend socio-spatial relations related to other changes, other permanences, other anchorages than those of the State and the nation. Ildiko Erdei noted, from 2009, a certain fatigue in the eyes of researchers on this space, especially in the mobilisation of the dichotomy nationalism/anti-nationalism as a unique explanatory paradigm. In my thesis work, it was a matter of following his invitation to further mobilise other explanatory paradigms to approach "new" post-conflict, post-Yugoslav and post-socialist societies.<sup>40</sup>

If leaving the explanatory paradigm of nationalism/anti-nationalism is a first step, this work is far from sufficient, one ideology replaces another. And it would be naïve and vain to think that one could develop a language that is theoretically neutral and non-biased: "While we are still striving for an adequate terminology not colored by methodological nationalism, we can already predict that emerging concepts will necessarily again limit and shape our perspective, again force us to overlook some developments and emphasize others<sup>41</sup>". Each observation depends on the positionality of the researcher. Each of his or her analyses depends on the conceptual focus which limits the scope of the empirical research and the interpretations. The challenge is then to position his or her research theoretically and epistemologically, to find the balance between intelligibility and consistency: "The task is to determine what reductions of complexity will make best sense of the contemporary world and which ones are leaving out too many tones and voices, transforming them into what model builders call *noise*<sup>42</sup>".

So, beyond methodological nationalisms, what are the other dominant "conceptual structures" put in place to address the post-Yugoslav space? What are their contributions and their limits? And how have I positioned myself epistemologically with regard to them?

<sup>36</sup> James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, *op. cit.*, p. 982.

<sup>37</sup> Getting rid of certain "self-evidences", especially in the very way that scales are conceptualised, then leads to exploring new spaces and political plans outside the "comfortable dichotomies", which "implies and consolidates all at once the idea of a hierarchy between superior and inferior, global and local" (Catherine Neveu, "Introduction", in Catherine Neveu (eds.), *Cultures and participative practices. Perspectives comparatives*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007, pp. 13-30)

<sup>38</sup> James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, *op. cit.*, p. 995.

<sup>39</sup> Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology", *International Migration Review*, vol. 37, no 3, 2003, p. 600

<sup>40</sup> Ildiko Erdei, "Hopes and Visions. Business, Culture and Capacity for Imagining Local Future in Southeast Serbia", *Etnoantropološki problemi*, vol. 4, no 3, 2009, p. 82

<sup>41</sup> Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, *op. cit.*, p. 600.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2. Going beyond the reading of the post-socialist transition

The second dominant reading of post-Yugoslav space, and more broadly of European states formerly belonging to the "communist bloc", is offered by the supposedly explanatory paradigm (but just as normative as the methodological nationalisms) of post-socialism. It led to describing the former Yugoslavia as facing the challenge of the "democratic transition"<sup>43</sup>, in the process of *Europeanisation*<sup>44</sup>, in the process of an unfinished stabilisation process<sup>45</sup>. These few formulations reveal how the region has often been portrayed in French research (and not only therein) in recent years. However, as the political scientist Jean Leca points out, "it is difficult to distinguish what in the field of *transitology* relayed by *consolidatology* is based on the empirical analysis of a process about which the scientist theorises, and which concerns participation in a process in which the scientist theorises and the citizen acts"<sup>46</sup>. This is the first limit of these approaches; the lack of reflexivity in the text does not allow us to distinguish clearly what the explanation is of what comes under the prescriptions to "democratise", to "Europeanise", to "stabilise". Such approaches underlie, by the language used, a conceptual structuring in "post-", post-conflicts, post-nationalism, but also post-socialism, post-communism and even postyugoslav (I will come back to the last one in the next section). The pre-accession process for the EU, as it is conceived today for the Western Balkans, largely takes up the precepts conceived in the context of the accession of the countries of Eastern Europe, strongly influenced by a post-socialist reading. This reading raises a question: "Postsocialism gets lost because it is largely presumed to be a process of democratization or Europeanization and thus uncritically positioned vis-à-vis the first World"<sup>47</sup>. Research on the democratic transition then becomes an implicit field of comparison of which the West apparently constitutes the standard, implicit or explicit: "the models of transformation observed in the consolidated hyperreal democracies of Western Europe are treated as the only valid model for democracy. Actors and structures found in other societies are signified as deficits of or obstacles to democratization"<sup>48</sup>.

Indeed, the "post" approach is based on a generally binary reading that postulates in the first place a territorial confinement between two so-called homogeneous and opposite blocs (socialist bloc versus capitalist bloc, democratic bloc versus nationalist bloc, etc.). Madina Tlostanova questions, for example, this supposed homogeneity in post-communist categorisation: "Postcommunism itself is a highly questionable umbrella term lumping together societies which share an experience of communist political regimes but have different local histories and distinct understandings of their situation, aims, roles and prospects in the global world"<sup>49</sup>; as much as Jennifer Suchland: "we cannot safely say [...] that the post-communist space is or was a homogeneous place"<sup>50</sup>.

Beyond that, this reading also postulates a temporal break on which a narrative of modernity is based - everything was bad before in your traditional model (socialist, *Yugoslav*, *Balkan*, *nationalist*), everything will be better in the future if you follow our progressive model (*European*, *liberal*, *democratic*): "transition is perceived as not only a necessary, but also a well-defined, clearly directed process at whose end the former socialist societies should fully implement ready-made models coming from the West"<sup>51</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Christophe Chiclet, "Transition démocratique dans l'ex-Yougoslavie", *Confluences Méditerranée*, no 21, 1997, pp. 103-109.

<sup>44</sup> Igor Štiks, "L'eupéanisation des pays successeurs de l'ex-Yougoslavie : la fin de la conception ethnocentrique de la citoyenneté", dans Amandine Crespy and Mathieu Petithomme (dir.), *L'Europe sous tensions. Appropriation et contestation de l'intégration européenne*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009, pp. 281-304

<sup>45</sup> Renaud Dhorliac, "Vingt ans d'ex-Yougoslavie : une transition générationnelle inachevée", *Annuaire français de relations internationales*, vol. 15, 2014, pp. 133- 149

<sup>46</sup> Jean Leca, "Sur la gouvernance démocratique : entre théorie et méthode de recherche empirique", *Politique européenne*, vol. 1, no 1, 2000, p. 108.

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Suchland, "Is Postsocialism Transnational? ", *Signs*, vol. 36, no 4, 2011, p. 839.

<sup>48</sup> Manuela Boatcă and Sérgio Costa, "Postcolonial Sociology: A Research Agenda", in Manuela Boatcă, Sérgio Costa and Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (dir.), *Decolonizing European Sociology*, London, Ashgate, 2010, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no 2, 2012, p. 131.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Suchland, *op. cit.*, p. 844

<sup>51</sup> Tanja Petrović, "Introduction: Europeanization and the Balkans", in Tanja Petrović (dir.), *Mirroring Europe. Ideas of Europe*

Temporal categorisation then serves the differentiation according to a scale of progress: “The *catching up* timeline can be seen as temporal othering, based on a linear conception of temporality that generates a periodisation of chronological sequences and functions as a taxonomy of progress and backwardness<sup>52</sup>”. This differentiation gives rise to a balance of power between the situations observed: “difference is understood as points on a vertical scale of inferiority/superiority, presence/lack or advancement/backwardness, rather than on a horizontal field of plurality in which no point has definitional advantage over the others<sup>53</sup>”. The standard narrative of a West European modernity represents the “colonisation of space by time<sup>54</sup>”, “the obliteration of space by time<sup>55</sup>” or the “discursive victory of time over space<sup>56</sup>”, of which Doreen Massey offers a summary portrait: “That is to say that differences that are truly spatial are interpreted as being differences in temporal development – differences in the stage of progress reached. Spatial differences are reconvened as temporal sequence<sup>57</sup>”.

“Postsocialism” is not only a geographical and temporal label, it is also a Western-centred analytic category<sup>58</sup>. Its use can lead the researcher to participate in the reproduction of the balance of power on which this modernist reading of the world, and in particular of the Balkans, is based. Critics of this reading are numerous. Summoning certain contributions of the postcolonial approach, Todorova's decolonial works<sup>59</sup> and Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of world systems, Manuela Boatcă, for example, underline the symbolic violence in the body-(semi) periphery relationship between Western Europe and the Balkans:

Geographically European (by 20th century standards, at any rate), yet culturally alien by definition, the Balkans, as the Orient, have conveniently absorbed massive political, ideological and cultural tensions inherent to the regions outside the Balkans, thus exempting the West from charges of racism, colonialism, Eurocentrism and Christian intolerance while serving ‘as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of Europe and the West has been constructed (Todorova 1997: 60)<sup>60</sup>

The Balkans embody in the European imagination the geographical, temporal and symbolic gap between the West and the East, that is to say both the convenient margin that is invoked as a negative reference and the shield that protects from much worse.

If we apply the paradigm of transition to the field of research, then the Serbo-Croatian border represents both a place of evil, partly fantasised, a space (among others) to integrate into modernity, the first consideration serving to justify the second. The process of enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans is the continuation of the work to absorb the East European: “this new *civilizing mission* meant being once again defined as *catching up* with the West and embarking on a supposed transition from the Second to the First World, whose conditions – in the form of EU regulations [...] – are being dictated by the latter<sup>61</sup>”. The discourse of modernity is carried and reproduced by the EU, which defines the entry standards to its body, but also by the candidate countries that aspire to integrate the centre:

Politically and epistemologically, what is at stake for those ex-communist countries having long made the bone of contention of Europe's powerful empires is the possibility of a renewed shift of axis – away from the semiperipheral identity of an Eastern bloc country and toward a yet-to-be-defined position within the

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*and Europeanization in Balkan Societies*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill, 2014, pp. 10-11.

<sup>52</sup> Redi Koobak and Raili Marling, “The Decolonial Challenge: Framing Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe within Transnational Feminist Studies », *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 21, no 4, 2014, p. 338

<sup>53</sup> Mahua Sarkar, “Looking for Feminism”, *Gender and History*, vol. 16, no 2, 2004, p. 328.

<sup>54</sup> Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Redi Koobak and Raili Marling, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>56</sup> Doreen Massey, “Imagining Globalization: Power-Geometries of Time-Space”, in Avtar Brah, Mary Hickman and Mairtin Mac an Ghaille (dir.), *Global Futures: Migration, Environment, and Globalization*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1999, p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Redi Koobak et Raili Marling, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>59</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>60</sup> Manuela Boatcă, “Semiperipheries in the World-System: Reflecting Eastern European and Latin American Experiences”, *Journal of World-Systems Research*, vol. 12, no 2, 2006, p. 327.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

orbit of the Euro-American core<sup>62</sup>.

This pirouette from the East to the West is particularly visible in the discourse of the elites, in Slovenia, Croatia or Estonia, for example: the constant rejection of their Orientality and the accent placed on the opposite of their will, and even their right, to Westernisation seen as a "return to Europe"<sup>63</sup>.

Under the guise of analysing - and enjoining - Europeanisation, many researchers reproduce this discourse and this posture: much of [...] research, both by Western and CEE scholars alike, seems to take categories of difference, such as "Western" or "Eastern European" for granted, without attempting a relational reading of how such difference is constructed in the first place, and to what end<sup>64</sup>. The consequence, taking for example the West-East division without questioning it, is to naturalise this difference.

All of these thoughts sounded like warnings during my thesis. Rather than questioning my subject of study (the Serbo-Croat border in the context of pre-accession to the EU), they pushed me to be vigilant about how to conceptualise spatially and temporally the way I was going to approach it. Among the epistemological and political stakes, it was notably to avoid observing the cross-border cooperation policy as if its establishment constituted, in my opinion, a proof of the democratisation or the Europeanisation of formerly socialist territories - even if it were the intention of the EU. I focused instead on the potential social and spatial reconfigurations that this policy generates (or not) and reflects (or not) at the border. This critical posture finally led me to organise the field approach from the Serbia/Croatia border identified as the starting point and focus of attention, from which I was then able to observe the injunctions to cooperation and to reconciliation in the framework of pre-accession (the second object).

### 3. Thinking post-Yugoslav, the fake panacea?

Failure to reproduce the analytical frameworks of methodological nationalism or of postsocialism does not mean that it is a question of denying the importance of integrating nationalisms and the Yugoslav socialist past into the understanding of the Serbo-Croatian border. This critical positioning consists rather in refusing for oneself, in the elaboration of the field survey, the reifications of societies, spaces, individuals and situations that the exclusive use of one or the other of the conceptual structures would entail. In this way, the goal is also to help update how these categorisations continue to be used prominently in social research conducted in the region. The question then becomes: how does one think outside of - even against - these exclusive frames of reference? Chari Sharad and Katherine Verdery invite, for example, a kind of intersectionality between the "posts": "we ought to think between the posts because they can offer complementary tools to rethink contemporary imperialism"<sup>65</sup>.

Following this logic, I returned with two colleagues to a collective article published in 2015 on what seemed to us to be, then, the main strengths of the post-Yugoslav paradigm:

in the plural and non-exclusive way in which it is defined here, the post-Yugoslav term escapes, in part, some of the normative limits pointed out in relation to other post-. It serves to translate social hybridity rather than dichotomy, synchrony rather than diachrony. It is conceived in contrast to nationalism to qualify (1) a voluntarily vague moment, that of the time after the dislocation of the political entity called Yugoslavia (postulating the survival and fluidity of certain ideas related to it); (2) a space defined by unclear human practices, territories and societies with often common histories and representations, whose proximities and socio-spatial exchanges sometimes persist, change and redeploy. It aims to translate persistences and resistances, not just breaks, without postulating the rails of a linear progression or a homogeneous spatial

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* et Cyril Blondel, "How Approaching Peripheralisation without Peripheralising? Decolonising (Our) Discourses on Socio-Spatial Polarisation in Europe", in press.

<sup>64</sup> Redi Koobak and Raili Marling, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

<sup>65</sup> Chari Sharad and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Post-Colonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War », *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 51, no 1, 2009, p. 12.

dispersion, but, on the contrary, of simultaneities and divergences, without implying either an objective, a model, necessarily better, supposedly more democratic<sup>66</sup>.

Because we used (appropriately, I think) the term post-yugoslav in the special issue we were coordinating, it seems to me that we contented ourselves with justifying its interest, that is to say, above all to highlight the advantages of using this category. However, as Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller point out, any conceptualisation leads to limiting and formatting one's perspective, to neglecting certain elements at the expense of others to which one then pays an exaggerated attention<sup>67</sup>.

Thus, what constitutes the main advantage of the "post-yugoslav" category of analysis is perhaps also its main limitation. Conceived in response to the nationalisms of the 1990s, the term remains based on the historical essentialisation of a single temporal break (the collapse of Yugoslavia as zero time) and anchored in the nostalgia for an idealised political and societal project (the "Third way" of Yugoslavian self-managing socialism). By wielding a political and territorial particularism as a basis for understanding contemporary phenomena that, above all, would be understood only as specifically regional, it does not really make it possible to go beyond the Balkan aporias pointed out over several decades<sup>68</sup>. Finally, one may wonder whether to use the term postyugoslav does not lead to falling into the three traps of methodological nationalism at the same time, simply by moving them to another scale. Does this category of analysis not risk enclosing the researcher himself or herself in the *Yugonostalgia*<sup>69</sup> he or she claims to capture? Conceived as a way of escaping an approach centred on the nationalisms of the 1990s (at the forefront of which were Serbian and Croatian), does it not risk leading to focus too much on (and overvaluing) the Yugoslav legacy?

In this case, the comparative intersectionality of Sharad and Verdery appears to be insufficient. Juxtaposing the conceptual structures of postcommunism and postcolonial or postimperial theory does not allow us to go beyond the blind spots common to all these approaches. What is necessary for the opening of a real dialogue between the approaches is to make the intersectionality of hermeneutics the starting point of the research: "Instead of comparing everything and everyone with the Western ideal used as a model for the whole of humanity, we can turn to an imperative mutual learning process based on pluritopic hermeneutics<sup>70</sup>". This means both escaping universalist applications of ready-to-use discourses and travelling theories, to start from the diversity of subjectivities and experiences of local histories marked by colonial and imperial differences (or their combination) within modernity/coloniality.<sup>71</sup>

Tlostanova's conclusion on the former Soviet space can then inspire that of this section on the post-Yugoslav space. The post-socialist, postimperialist and postconflict connotations intersect and communicate constantly in the complex imaginary of the post-Yugoslav space, leading to nostalgia and recycling of imperial and nationalist myths. What seems ultimately necessary is what might be called "de-Yugoslavisation<sup>72</sup>". Returning to the previous model does not allow us to go beyond the dichotomy of Yugoslavia/nationalisms since both are constructed in opposition, thus mirroring one another. The "de-Yugoslavisation" refers to a new impetus just like "de-Sovietisation":

Such an impulse is based not on negation or self-victimization, nor on violence, but on the creation of something different, other than modern/ colonial/socialist, taking its own path, superseding the contradictions inherent in these categories. In this context, creolization, hybridity, bilingualism, the psychology of the returned gaze and the colonialist/ colonizer intersection, as well as a stress on transculturation instead of acculturation and assimilation, can

<sup>66</sup> Cyril Blondel, Guillaume Javourez and Marie van Effenterre, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>67</sup> Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, *op. cit.*

<sup>68</sup> See in particular: Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia", *Slavic Review*, vol. 54, no 4, 1995, p. 917-931; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, *op. cit.*

<sup>69</sup> Similar to *Ostalgie* in Germany to some extent, for example, *Yugonostalgia* refers to a feeling of nostalgia for the remoteness of a recent past related to the ideals of the defunct federation and certain aspects of everyday life at its heart.

<sup>70</sup> Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality", *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> A neologism that refers to others more commonly used in literature, such as de-Sovietisation or de-colonisation.

already be found in their specific postsocialist forms, which often parallel postcolonial ones<sup>73</sup>.

This last point needs to be clarified because the stakes are multiple. On the one hand, it is a question of pointing to the relationship of domination established by the discursive use of stereotypes of Balkanità, in the post-Yugoslav context, from the outside by the West, which tries to impose its modernity. On the other hand, it is also a matter of deconstructing the use of Balkanism, within the region and on different scales<sup>74</sup>, as an instrument of territorial and social differentiation<sup>75</sup>. Nevertheless, it is not a question of essentialising the regional scale in itself by singling out the post-Yugoslav experience. In other words, Balkanism is a particular type of Orientalism but remains Orientalism (observable in other Eastern European and more generally post-Soviet spaces)<sup>76</sup>. Understanding the flexibility but also the circumstances of the use of representations of the Other in the process of differentiation and European integration becomes a central issue: "This reinscription of otherness [...] functions not as a clear-cut binary but as a more flexible and contingent attribution of Europeanness versus Eastness to different places. It operates through multiple demarcations, which share the opposition of Europe and the East but delineate these categories differently<sup>77</sup>". This implies for the researcher approaching the socio-spatial reconfigurations by integrating the geopolitical categories of knowledge, allowing the historical recontextualisation of their uses as much as the criticism of the presuppositions of exceptionalism on which they rest. It is there, it seems to me, one of the contributions of the decolonial option.

#### 4. The decolonial option: repoliticising the ethnographic situation

Conceiving inheritances as indissociably colonial and modern, the decolonial option articulates "economic, sociological and historical analyses with philosophical developments<sup>78</sup>". Culture is then thought of as "constitutive of capitalist accumulation processes<sup>79</sup>".

Faced with the limitations of using the paradigms previously discussed, some researchers, primarily from the *Suds*<sup>80</sup>, propose an epistemic break in order to deconstruct the discursive bases of the modernist and colonial project (the one and the other going together according to them ), and thus to expose the coloniality of knowledge:

Coloniality of knowledge is a typically modern syndrome, consisting of all models of cognition and thinking, and interpreting the world and the people, the subject-object relations, the

<sup>73</sup> Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality", *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>74</sup> As Stef Jansen points out about Croatia in the 1990s: "Croatian nationalism in the 1990s cannot be comprehended at all without the notion of the Balkans. It played a central role in almost all variations on the Croatian nationalistic theme, and that role was a consequence of its position of the supreme, negative Other" (Stef Jansen, "Svakodnevní orijentalizam: doživljaj "Balkana" i "Evrope" u Beogradu i Zagrebu", *ilozofija i drustvo [Journal of the Belgrade Institute for Social Research and Philosophy]*, vol. 18, 2002, p. 42).

<sup>75</sup> Orlanda Obad, "On the Privilege of the Peripheral Point of View: A Beginner's Guide to the Study and Practice of Balkanism", in Tanja Petrović (dir.), *Mirroring Europe. Ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan societies*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill, 2014, p. 28.

<sup>76</sup> Maria Todorova, "Balkanism and Postcolonialism, or on the Beauty of the Airplane View", in Costică Brădăţan and Sergej Aleksandrovič Ušakin (dir.), *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Lexington Books, 2011, p. 190.

<sup>77</sup> Merje Kuus, *op. cit.*, p. 484

<sup>78</sup> Capucine Boidin, "Études décoloniales et postcoloniales dans les débats français", *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, vol. 62, 2010, pp 131 -132.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132. Capucine Boidin is here referring to the work of Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel (*El giro decolonial, Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica mas allá del capitalismo global*, Bogota, Siglo del Hombre Ed., 2007).

<sup>80</sup> I am here basing myself on the reading of a reduced set of works, those previously mentioned but also: Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, New York, Princeton University Press, 1995; Walter D. Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova, "Theorizing from the Borders. Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge", *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 9, no 2, 2006, p. 205-221 ; Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking. The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality", *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no 2-3, 2007, p. 449-514.

organisation of disciplinary divisions, entirely dependent on the norms and rules created and imposed by western modernity since the 16th century, and offered to humankind as universal, delocalised and disembodied<sup>81</sup>.

According to this perspective, modernity in itself is not an objective historical process, it is above all a system generating "the hegemonic narrative of Western civilisation"<sup>82</sup>. Some aspects of the story are told in a certain way and are presented as an objective ontological reality. And the knowledge system on which this story rests becomes an instrument for disavowing other forms of knowledge, pushing them away from modernity:

The co-existence of diverse ways of producing and transmitting knowledge is eliminated because now all forms of human knowledge are ordered on an epistemological scale from the traditional to the modern, from barbarism to civilization, from the community to the individual, from the orient to occident<sup>83</sup>.

Scientific thought is then positioned as the only valid form of knowledge production. And Europe thus acquires an epistemological hegemony over all the other cultures of the World, which leads the researcher to a "zero-point hubris"<sup>84</sup>. Tlostanova describes the latter as an arrogant desire to take the position of the outside observer (which thus cannot be observed), supposedly cleared of any bias or subjective interest claiming to seek pure truth and not compromised<sup>85</sup>. Both territorial and imperial, this epistemology is based on "doctrines of theological (Renaissance) and egological (Enlightenment) knowledge [...] based on the suppression of sensitivity, of the body and of its geo-historical deep-rootedness [that] [...] enabled them [...] to claim it as universal"<sup>86</sup>.

The theoreticians of the decolonial option invite us to change the biography and geography of reason by accepting the plurality of geo-doctrines of knowledge<sup>87</sup> and the plurality of corpo-doctrines of feeling, believing and understanding<sup>88</sup>. To achieve this, decolonial thinkers advocate a border epistemology that focuses on "changing the terms of the discussion and not just on its content"; which means disengagement from Western democracy, capitalism and communism as the only ways of thinking, doing or living<sup>89</sup>. Enacting border thinking requires a sensitivity to the world<sup>90</sup> that is not a world view because "this favourite expression of Western epistemology blocks feelings and the sensory fields beyond vision"<sup>91</sup>. In this sense, it constitutes an act of epistemological disobedience: thinking and acting in a decolonial way comes about by "inhabiting and thinking of the borders of local histories confronted with global designs"<sup>92</sup>. Its purpose is to demonstrate that "modernity (peripheral or not, subordinate or not, alternative or not) is also only an

<sup>81</sup> Madina Tlostanova, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>82</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Géopolitique de la sensibilité et du savoir. (Dé)colonialité, pensée frontalière et désobéissance épistémologique", *Mouvements*, no 73, 2013, p. 187

<sup>83</sup> Santiago Castro-Gómez, "The Missing Chapter of Empire: Postmodern Reorganization of Coloniality and Post-Fordist Capitalism", *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, nos 2-3, 2007, p. 433.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Madina Tlostanova, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>86</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Géopolitique de la sensibilité et du savoir. (Dé)colonialité, pensée frontalière et désobéissance épistémologique" *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>87</sup> Local spatial and temporal roots of knowledge.

<sup>88</sup> The collective and individual biographical bases of understanding and thought rooted in particular local histories and trajectories. For more details, see: Walter D. Mignolo, "Géopolitique de la sensibilité et du savoir. (Dé)colonialité, pensée frontalière et désobéissance épistémologique", *op. cit.*, p. 183; Madina Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference", *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>89</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Géopolitique de la sensibilité et du savoir. (Dé)colonialité, pensée frontalière et désobéissance épistémologique", *op. cit.* p. 182 182

<sup>90</sup> Integrating less rational methodologies, as for example the collective of researchers of artists and professionals engaged in the "Anti-Atlas of borders". The latter, to approach contemporary changes in borders, advocates indiscipline and experimentation.

<sup>91</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Géopolitique de la sensibilité et du savoir. (Dé)colonialité, pensée frontalière et désobéissance épistémologique", *op. cit.* p. 185.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

option and not the "natural" course of time<sup>93</sup>."

Beyond the arguments it provides to the critique of classical analytic categories, what can the decolonial option bring to the epistemological reflection conducted in Europe? What can the reading of thoughts developed first in the Latin American context produce? And would not trying to transfer them be to betray their epistemological and ontological roots in the experiences and struggles of the *Suds*?

As Capucine Boidin points out, decolonial and postcolonial studies provoke debate and resistance in the French social sciences. She notes three main criticisms: "United States-centrism, Manichaeism and essentialism" often united in a "capital sin: communitarianism<sup>94</sup>". But one may wonder: isn't this opposition in principle used to clear oneself in advance of the responsibility for an in-depth interpretation? Everything happens "as if it were difficult to conceive of insights from traditions that are considered peripheral could bring relevant perspectives to the world<sup>95</sup>." To exclude them from the realm of knowledge and from the academic agenda is to consider them as objects of knowledge, and not as creators of knowledge, or else as "necessarily local knowledge with a local scope<sup>96</sup>". That would be to discredit them by invoking precisely the reason why the authors have elaborated such a thought.

Contrary to this conservative reaction, I chose to enlist the decolonial approach in my thesis on the Serbia/Croatia border. In this way, I joined the ongoing work that has recently transposed this analysis, conducted first in the American context, to the second world (Eastern Europe, Balkans, Caucasus, post-Soviet space)<sup>97</sup>. They start from the same observation. In order not to reduce the superposition and the complex rivalry between different forms of epistemic colonialism that run through discourses and imagery, it is a question of rejecting the rhetoric of modernity and its reductive simplification - the opposition between the modern (Western by default) and the traditional (which requires the approval of a neocolonial power). In this way, the change in the discourse of modernity becomes more apparent, as for example in the post-Soviet context: « today the formula *national in its form, socialist in its content* gives way to a different one: *market and developmentalist in its essence, official-ersatz-ethnic-national in its form*<sup>98</sup> ».

A better understanding of these often-forgotten spaces after the cold war requires taking into account multiple and successive wounds: "the problematic of subaltern empires (Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Sultanate, Russia) which act as intellectual and mental colonies of the first-rate capitalist Western empires in modernity, and consequently, create their own type of secondary colonial difference<sup>99</sup>".

In the case of the field chosen in my thesis, integrating the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman secondary colonial differences allowed me to better apprehend the discursive and reflective use of the Balkans as an "incomplete other of Europe<sup>100</sup>". Decolonial thinking has also allowed me to better understand the entanglement of successive colonial projects. In fact, on the above-mentioned Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman base frame, another modernity, socialist, "mutant, marginal, yet resolutely Western in its way of thinking and acting, has been printed, a global emancipatory utopia that has become reactionary and conservative<sup>101</sup>".

The third aspect (and interest) in the application of decolonial thinking to South-Eastern Europe is the reflection on the syndrome of self-colonisation (especially researchers). According to Tlostanova, this is the most difficult element to apprehend (and to overcome) in the North-West domination of South-East Europe, but also the most crucial:

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Speranta Dumitru, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Here mainly the work of Madina Tolstanova, Manuela Boatcă and Redi Koobak is enlisted.

<sup>98</sup> Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality", *op. cit.* pp. 138-139

<sup>99</sup> Madina Tlostanova, *Towards a Decolonization of Thinking and Knowledge: A Few Reflections from the World of Imperial Difference*, 2009, [https://antville.org/static/sites/m1/files/madina\\_tlostanova\\_decolonia\\_thinking.pdf](https://antville.org/static/sites/m1/files/madina_tlostanova_decolonia_thinking.pdf), p. 4, accessed 19 September 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, *op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> Madina Tlostanova, *Towards a Decolonization of Thinking and Knowledge: A Few Reflections from the World of Imperial Difference*, *op. cit.*, p. 4

Within the world of imperial difference all modernity discourses acquire secondary, othered and mutant forms. This refers to secondary Eurocentrism practiced by people who have often no claims to it [...], to secondary Orientalism and racism that flourish particularly in relation to the non-European colonies of subaltern empires [...] giving them a multiply colonized status and a specific subjectivity often marked with self-racialisation and self-orientalising. Without these additional categories we cannot rethink humanities, social movements or subjectivities in these spaces, we cannot hope to de-colonize or de-imperialize them<sup>102</sup>.

The decolonisation of knowledge then requires first and foremost the decolonisation of the research produced on this space-time. The main difficulty probably lies in the negation by cultural producers of "multiple subjectivities, distorted reflections" typical of the "Second world"<sup>103</sup>. But these last do not correspond to what one finds in "the enormous supermarket of ideas, thoughts, theories, philosophies, religions proposed by the modern world"<sup>104</sup>. This diversity does not seem to correspond either to the Western approach of "scientific thinking as the only valid form of knowledge production"<sup>105</sup>. This last point has constituted (and still constitutes today) a source of inspiration, decolonial thought as the thread of an epistemological, reflexive and critical gymnastics for research in Europe and on Europe<sup>106</sup>, like for that which can be conducted elsewhere and on an elsewhere.

Thus, more than a positioning, the decolonial option proposes a political agenda, undoubtedly idealistic, for an independent research at the same time more understanding and more critical, in particular on the post-Yugoslav space-time, which feeds universities that emancipate individuals:

The value of any independent social approaches then would be linked with their ability to [...] turn to the goals and tasks of academia that have been long forgotten, such as the crucial aim of the university to shape not a submissive and loyal narrow specialist in some applied science but first of all a critically thinking self-reflexive and independent individual, never accepting any ready-made truths at face value, truly and unselfishly interested in the world around in all its diversity and striving to make this world more harmonious and fair for everyone and not only for particular privileged groups. And is this not ultimately the true mission of a vigorous decolonized social theory?<sup>107</sup>

It requires learning to unlearn in order to relearn on other bases and frames of thought, and sometimes to create new thoughts or reshape existing ones. Thus, it is measured tangentially, the decolonial option is a political and epistemological bias, which leads to taking more into account the historical and cultural balance of power in the elaboration and understanding of the ethnographic situation; and this is true, as much for the inquirer as for the inquiry, and in their relationships. The risk may be, behind the imperative of the struggle against cultural essentialism, to print a kind of political essentialisation, which would amount to reading every act and every word (including their absence), every observation and every field report, and more broadly any research situation, from the exclusive angle of its political sense.

## Conclusion

This article was an opportunity to review and discuss the epistemological and political questions posed by the research conducted in my thesis. It reflects my awareness of certain elements of the latter's geopolitical context (the enlargement of the EU as a modernist absorption project) as well as its latent impregnation

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Jaan Kaplinski, *The Brave New Merry-Go-Round*, 2002, <http://jaan.kaplinski.com/opinions/merry-go-round.html>, accessed the 19 September 2017

<sup>105</sup> Santiago Castro-Gómez, "The Missing Chapter of Empire: Postmodern Reorganization of Coloniality and Post-Fordist Capitalism", *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no 2-3, 2007, pp. 428-448.

<sup>106</sup> In my case, Croatia, Serbia, Estonia, France and Luxembourg.

<sup>107</sup> Madina Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference", *op. cit.*, p. 54

in the way the question is asked by most researchers, including me (the reproduction of the modernist reading grid to observe this phenomenon). The majority of those involved in setting up the European project, but also in its analysis, are affected by the colonisation or self-colonisation "syndrome". Regardless of the places in which they act and of which they speak - which could also be described as the interpenetration of scales of domination - they offer a dichotomous reading of the phenomenon and the way in which it is studied. The demarcation of modernity and its discourses (in an epistemic sense) makes it necessary to have a greater reflexivity on the concepts and the methods used, in order, if not to be able to fight against, to at least make apparent the unavoidable biases of the situation ethnographic, as well as trying to limit its participation in the maintenance of dominant discourses through the use of its grammar. The researcher's awareness of his own limitations also means reflecting the social status he or she embodies in the field. To stand out from modernity is not only about oneself but also about others' perceptions of themselves. Without it being either a question of or possible to reach the truth of the social world or on the social world: "In a certain way, as far as the social world is concerned, the perspectivism as defined by Nietzsche cannot be surpassed: everyone has his truth, everyone has the truth of his interests [...] If there is a truth, it is that this truth is the object of a fight<sup>108</sup>".

This article also expresses a disenchantment that is not very original in itself. The revelation of the difficulties and ambiguities of organising and carrying out fieldwork highlights what Didier Fassin describes as an ethnographic test, "a risk-taking that begins in the inquiry relationship and extends into the work of writing [...] beyond the singularity of experiences<sup>109</sup>". But as he points out: "These issues concern nothing less than the truthfulness of the investigation, the human relationship in which it is anchored, the results we can draw from it and the social effects that we produce in doing so<sup>110</sup>".

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