

The Unbearable Lightness of Critique of the Enlightenment

The limits of the enlightenment in Europe's eastern periphery

Reading "The Invention of Eastern Europe" 25 Later.

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The background for writing this review was that of Larry Wolff's book, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilizations on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, which was published in autumn 2020 in a Polish translation, more than 25 years after its first English edition. This review attempts to see how the book can be read today.

Introduction

When I went to the theatre in Poznan to see "The Great Frederick," I felt a certain unease. The anxiety resulted from both the duration of the performance (over four hours!) and the subject matter. The performance is based on a long drama of over 400 pages, and the author, Adolf Nowaczyński, active before the Second World War, is a controversial figure, associated with the right wing and not shying away from anti-Semitism, that is, far from my political affiliations. However, the performance was successful.

Frederick the Great is not an easy character; Jan Peszek's bravura performance brought out in "Der Alte Fritz" ("The Old Fritz") both the psychological portrait of the aging king but also the tension, crucial for Adolf Nowaczyński's drama, among Polish national identity, the Enlightenment, and the modernistic impulse which comes in an external, imperialistic form. Frederick is a Prussian despot dismantling the country, on the one hand, and a modernizing role model, on the other. Nowaczyński's political realism argued that it takes both to survive.

On the one hand, that in modernizing eighteenth-century Europe there is no place for the "Iroquois of Europe" (as Frederick the Great describe Polish people), nobility stuck in the cultivation of Sarmatian myths (concept according to which Polish noble descend from Sarmatians, ancient Ario-Iranic people), maintaining the slavish serfdom-based economic system, remaining in the power of religious superstitions. On the other hand, there is a need for a critical distance to Frederick the Great; after all, too hasty yielding to externally controlled modernizing and enlightenment impulses may mean a loss of sovereignty and autonomy.

And the memory of that very performance accompanied me while reading Larry Wolff's book, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilizations on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. I was looking for equally ambiguous scenes and emblems, illustrations of tensions, and contradictions, in the figures of the "Great" Enlightenment autocrats often cited in the book — Catherine and Frederick. The birth of Eastern Europe "in the spirit of the Enlightenment" in Larry Wolff's version, unfortunately, offers no such tension.

Wolff, who wrote his book in the heated atmosphere of the early 1990s, succumbed to a kind of

"Eastermania" in presenting a catalogue of stereotypes, prejudices, errors, and idiosyncrasies shared by Western European travellers and thinkers of the Enlightenment. The book, which runs to over six hundred pages in its Polish edition, is a collection of complaints and grievances about Western and Enlightenment prejudicial, often racist, stereotypes. Wolff constructs his work in a similar way to Said's *Orientalism*, except that he tries to reconstruct not "the East" but "Eastern Europe."

The reading may amuse, the anecdotes are juicy, the descriptions invoked curmudgeonly in their ignorance. And the catalogue of vices of Enlightenment, philosophers and travellers can give a malicious sense of satisfaction. Only that these pleasures diminish when another thought is allowed to speak. From the beginning of my reading, I had a nagging question: how can one read this book today, twenty-five years after it was written. Does its anti-Enlightenment tone "work" today as it did back then?

Capitalism - the Big Absentee

Wolff writes in a lively, baroque manner (although perhaps he repeats certain motifs and anecdotes too often), and so the reading is seductive and captivating. It gets worse when we strip it of the charm of an efficient literary workshop and subject it to analytical dissection. A number of fundamental questions arise, disturbing in their consequences.

Wolff links the birth of Eastern Europe unequivocally with "discourse," with the creation of concepts, vocabulary, and representations along with Enlightenment reflection. According to the author, it is the hubris of the Age of Reason and its mania for division, classification, and mapping that is responsible for creating the great European difference between the eastern and western parts. Agreed; only that Wolff here navigates only on the level of epistemology. Throughout the book, he does not ask himself a simple question: did this discourse not correspond to some reality after all? Of course, nothing justifies the prideful, prejudiced, orientalisng judgments of Casanova, Voltaire, and Diderot; but are we not giving them too much weight, making them responsible for dividing Europe into two parts?

Yes, discourse is important, and so are concepts, but is it not also worth asking about materiality, economic conditions, and thus ontology? This topic appears at the beginning of the book, when very briefly - on two pages (sic!) - Wolff summarizes Immanuel Wallerstein's thesis about the economic genesis of the Great Divide. The objection is not even that what has occupied the entire research lives of such people as Witold Kula, Marian Małowist, Jerzy Topolski, or the aforementioned Wallerstein becomes a mere mention here (one can recognize that in the research work, various concepts of others are sometimes subjected to a simplifying synthesis).

Only this time, the key perspective on the topic has been reduced, and often polemical approaches have been simplified. According to world-systems thinkers, their predecessors and allies, Central Europe began to diverge in the so-called "long sixteenth century. Fernand Braudel and Lucien Febvre defined it as extending from 1450 to 1650. At that time, a combination of factors - a plague epidemic, the depopulation of Western Europe - set in motion, a pattern of trade that resulted in a growing "development of underdevelopment." The result was that Western Europe became the center of the capitalist world-system, and Eastern Europe (analogous to Latin America) was consigned to the role of its first periphery. From this perspective, what Enlightenment thinkers and travellers describe is not the "endemic" underdevelopment of our part of the world, but the result of three hundred years of accumulation of structures of exploitation: both external, based on unequal exchange of goods, and internal - the system of the second serfdom that was perpetuated by the former.

Using a “dependency” approach (Małowski, Wallerstein), we can accuse Enlightenment thinkers of not noticing that capitalist development has already ravaged the regions they were only just discovering. Except that, such an accusation is nowhere made by Larry Wolff and for a simple reason: it has no place in his apparatus. The author’s culturalist and relativist perspective does not allow for a critique of capitalism; it (capitalism) is, moreover, the great absentee of the entire book. And the critique in it is reduced to a version of postmodern identity politics. It is as tedious as the repeated critiques of the Enlightenment. Yes, it is worth noting that “those in the West” said ugly things about “those in the East,” and that this was related to the pole shift in Europe, in which Russia (and Poland) ceased to be countries of the North and became countries of the East. Except that is not enough. And in Wolff’s story, there is simply a switch of position – out, no longer write and speak “ugly” about Eastern Europe and let it be.

Are Enlightenment scholars the only ones with an “imperial-orientalist eye”?

And here enters the second troublesome (the first was the absence of ontology, material analysis, and capitalism) element of the book. Enlightenment is treated interchangeably with “Westernness” and treated by Wolff explicitly as an importation of something foreign into the “East.” Local figures who wish to become enlightened are not represented (this was the explicit intention of the book). Wolff disempowers the local representatives of the Enlightenment in this way, although he does so with the noble intention of portraying them as a victim of the West.

In this perspective, however, the discussion of whether Eastern Europe needed – and moreover, whether it wanted – the Enlightenment disappears altogether. Nowhere does Wolff raise this question. At the same time, another (third) problem arises: yes, the Enlightenment scholars did sin with the pride of the “imperial eye,” which objectified the Eastern European Other, but we do not know from the reading whether representatives of other social circles and worldviews did not also have such vices.

We know that the freemason and libertine Mozart laughed at the sound of the Czech language, calling his wife “Schabla Pumfa” during a trip to Prague and giving the rest of his traveling entourage equally bizarre nicknames. However, I would like to know what representatives of the clergy, papal nuncios, the reactionary aristocracy, and the emerging proto-industrial bourgeoisie thought about Czechs (and Central and Eastern Europe in general) at that time. Is it really the only the Enlightenment mind that has an “imperial-orientalist” taint? Or is it the case that it was widespread and Enlightenment scholars — despite their efforts to “bring light” — also shared it? At such moments, Wolff’s book worries me doubly, because I get the impression that today, contrary to the author’s intentions, it supports counter-Enlightenment.

This can be seen, for example, when reading passages analysing Voltaire and Rousseau [1]. The former in the name of the rule of reason, compliments Catherine the Great to the point of shamelessness, while the latter praises the Bar Confederates defending the Catholic Church and the nobility. Bar Confederation, was an armed uprising of the nobility, formed in 1768 in Bar in Podolia in defense of the independence of the Republic of Poland, threatened by Russian interference in its internal affairs (including the concessions imposed by it in favor of religious equality), at the same time a conservative movement against the attempts of progressive political reforms made at the beginning of the reign of King Stanisław August Poniatowski. Wolff’s narrative seems closer to the anti-Russian Rousseau and paints a rather warm picture of the Bar Confederates. Probably the “spirit of the times” resounds somewhere here (the atmosphere at the time the book was written): it is not difficult to see that Catherine the Great’s despotic Russia all too easily brings to mind the USSR, while the Bar Confederates embody the pro-independence spirit of the Polish Solidarity movement. Only today do we see that Solidarity’s flirtation with the Catholic Church ended with the most anti-freedom-of-reproductive-rights state on the European continent and the undoing of many

of the Enlightenment gains we owe to the Polish People's Republic.

Some might accuse me of being too hasty in imposing this comparison. I do it on purpose, aware of the risk, because at this point the most significant, in my opinion, weakness of Wolff's book is revealed: he does not try in any way to be, not even so much an ally, as even a sympathetic reviewer of the actions of the local Eastern and Central European Enlightenment. For, contrary to the perspective adopted in the book, there was no single Enlightenment. It was not only the French who enlightened, but also the Germans and the Scots. In many countries local "factors" also strove to reduce the arbitrariness of rulers, to make sure that citizens had stable legislation, and to stop the rule of the clergy.

The ambiguous charm of a pact with absolutism

Modernization, after all, is also an internal impulse: the desire to improve well-being, raise living standards, defeat "backward" and reactionary forces. However, the Enlightenment and modernizers in peripheral and semiperipheral countries do not have an easy life. Accusations of being an agent of foreign powers or a desire for denationalization are the order of the day. The fight against anti-Enlightenment and anti-modernization's forces often means having to enter into highly ambiguous alliances such as the alliance of the Enlightenment with absolutist monarchs, which appears repeatedly in the pages of the book.

With hindsight, Voltaire's musings on Catherine the Great or Kant's flattery of Frederick the Great may seem distasteful. It is worth asking, however, in what name were they uttered? Maybe those "enlightened lickspittles" were neither naive nor stupid, maybe they knew very well that science, progress and freedom had to be fought for (and sacrificed). Maybe the Enlightenment, contrary to the content of their writings, were not so sure about the existence of an unambiguous "march of the spirit through history". Voltaire's dilemmas are reminiscent of the Western Left's alliance with the USSR, which saw Stalin as the providence for much longer than Eastern Europeans did. But that if you were transferred in a time machine to the 18th century, who would you choose? Catherine the Great or the Bar Confederation; defending the interests of the nobility and the Catholic Church or the enlightened, although despotic Russian tsarina (who, among other things, issued the law on equal rights for dissenters, which was one of the main reasons for the resistance of the confederates)?

Wolff's book was written under the influence of the liberal euphoria of the early 1990s, where it seemed, according to Fukuyama's prophecy, that the Whig vision of history must prevail, that progress rolls on its own as long as it is not impeded by radicalisms. Today we know, however, that this is not necessarily the case. Progress has proven to be much more fragile and does not defend itself. This is clear from the weeks of demonstrations in which women have risen up to fight for elementary human rights. And once again, especially on the left wing of Polish Women's Strike, the dilemmas mentioned above came back with full force.

Should we stand in solidarity with the liberal, capitalist European Union? Should we rejoice at the fact that it is still possible, even partially, to influence the local situation by referring to the external order of international law? How many of us have been tempted, even for a moment, to make the European Union what it is in right-wing fantasy: a queer-feminist-socialist-enlightened dictatorship?

As we collide once again with the alliance of "folwark" capitalism and clericalism, do we not better understand Polish communist philosopher Kronszy's famous statement in a letter to Milosz in 1948:

Who gives us the guarantee that this system, which makes freedom and progress possible, will pass through all dangers? On whom do we rely? Miners, some workers, and even Jews (I think not more

than 20%). That the majority is still against us is why we should give up such a historical opportunity. Therefore, I also sometimes let my temper flare on purpose: With Soviet gunstocks, we will teach people in this country to think rationally without alienation [2].

Of course: the Enlightenment, which tied an alliance with an absolute monarchy, or the communist dream, which died in alliance with a Stalinist dictatorship are not the solution. Only leaving things run along their own course does not solve things. Reality does not fix itself, rights, do not win themselves, neither do freedoms. And the fight for them often requires ambiguous alliances. [3]

If I were to define “modernity” as synthetically as possible, I would define it as the legacy of the Enlightenment and the consequences of capitalism. Looking for an alternative modernity that will deal with the negative consequences of capitalism (and in the optimistic version: overcome it), will we find an ally in Larry’s Wolff *Inventing Eastern Europe*?

Is a semiperipheral sovereign Enlightenment possible?

Despite the above criticisms, Wolff’s book remains valuable on some level: it clearly and explicitly shows how the Enlightenment in its perception and construction of Eastern Europe was entangled with racism, Orientalism, and intertwined with Western European imperialism. As a result, it is clear that the semiperipheral Enlightenment project has to contend with two enemies – a patronizing racist West and local ethno-nationalist identity politics that seeks salvation in some form of national sovereignty.

Only that the latter does not usually mean freeing oneself from the shackles of capitalism, or from the power of a global religious institution like the Catholic Church, but merely stripping off the Enlightenment wrapper. *The Inventing Eastern Europe* is a painful reading for the semiperipheral Enlightenment scholar, but it will not be so for the nationalist. The latter will find in Wolff’s reading confirmation of his anti-Western and anti-Enlightenment phobias. It is also a wonderful gift for nationalist and clerical critics of the European Union – for with a simple swap of a few tropes, they can argue that today’s EU directives, women’s and LGBT rights, pointing to the rule of law and the tripartite division of rights are a continuation of the Enlightenment’s racist policy of civilizing the East.

Yes, Enlightenment scholars like Kant and Herder wrote a lot of racist nonsense about the Slavs; yes, for Catherine and Frederick, the conquest of Poland was one of the components that created their imperial “greatness.” However, the most important question that Larry Wolff does not ask is how is an alternative semiperipheral Enlightenment possible? I think I know why the author failed to pose this question — he was hindered by the book’s deeply anti-communist thrust. Had it not been for that, perhaps he would have seen that “real socialisms” were just such an attempt at an alternative “self-imagining” of Eastern Europe.

“Real Socialisms” were an attempt to create an Enlightenment without and partly against Western Europe. They wanted to be the great proof that “we will catch up and overtake.” And they partly succeeded. It was the Soviet Sputnik that humiliated the U.S. by pointing out that in the space race they were the “chaser”; it was (now post-Communist) Cuba that was the exporter of medical aid; it was the Polish economist Michał Kalecki in the Economic Department of the UN Secretariat who designed the economic development plans for many countries. The traces of this global socialism and its ambitions can still be found today in the buildings of hospitals, schools, and factories scattered around the Third World.

However, it ultimately ended in failure. Partly because it was impossible to overcome the structural inequalities that had been accumulating for several decades. It was also partly because the

imagination of the semiperiphery was wracked by a sense of inferiority complex against the West. Finally, partly because of that West the “real socialisms” were fighting a very real, albeit “Cold”, war. In it, as Larry Wolff shows, the Western side (if only through the mouth of Zbigniew Brzeziński) did not hesitate to define the conflict in terms of a war between civilization and Barbarism.

In this sense, I agree with Larry Wolff and his book – it is worth exploring the imaginaries of the Enlightenment West to free ourselves from illusions. The Western Enlightenment is entangled in the imperial relations of power and domination. But, as Hegel showed, one cannot easily liberate oneself from the relations of power and dominion and the very identities constructed by them. Liberation cannot consist in a simple exchange of roles or an equally simple reactionary opposition. It is the system of violence itself that must be abolished by being mediated by something more universal. And here again we must return to the communist dream and the attempts to realize it.

Marx and Engels recognized the achievements of the Enlightenment and the bourgeois revolution as important contributions to the progress of human freedom. But they were an insufficient step for liberation from the relations of feudal violence had degenerated into capitalist enslavement. Hence, a further step was necessary to complete the program of the Enlightenment: to extend the sphere of freedom not only to the sphere of politics and law, but also to that of economics and social life.

In this sense, *Inventing Eastern Europe* is a dangerous book. For it may serve to extinguish the now feeble flame of Enlightenment thought and to undo even the feeble achievements of the bourgeois revolution. Do you think that I am exaggerating? Well, neoliberal capitalism in Poland is doing fine without the Enlightenment, feudal and neo-second serfdom labour relations are not rare today.

In the years of the pandemic, resistance to the idea of vaccination divides Polish society in half. In Poland, reading Condorcet or Diderot in public at a demonstration or theatre could end up in a lawsuit for insulting religious feelings. However, as Holderlin said (perhaps too optimistically), where there is danger, that which saves also increases. When the effects of the retreat of the Enlightenment are visible, then one can also see that they were not given once and for all, and therefore: one has to fight for them. It is in this perspective that *Inventing Eastern Europe* is worth reading as an antidote to the naive self-colonial, copycat search for the Enlightenment “in the West”. It is worth reaching for it to ask whether it is possible again not only to fight for a sovereign semiperipheral Enlightenment but also to abolish it for the sake of a more accelerationist and universalist project.

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P.S.

Left East

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<https://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/the-unbearable-lightness-of-critique-of-the-enlightenment-reading-the-invention-of-eastern-europe-25-later/>

Footnotes

[1] I consider Rousseau as a figure with a very ambiguous relationship to the Enlightenment. I agree with those who even see him as the father of the counter-enlightenment, see: Graeme Garrard, *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment A Republican Critique of the Philosophes*. *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment*, Suny Press, 2003.

[2] T. Kroński do Cz. Miłosza, 7 December 1948, Cz. Miłosz, *Zaraz po wojnie. Korespondencja z pisarzami 1945-1950*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 1999).

[3] I would like to remind that, in the interwar period, even such an elementary invention as a wooden toilet – “Sławojka” – and its popularization in Poland, as well as the whitewashing of huts, were due to Sławoj Felicjan Składkowski, who, on the one hand, became famous for his “civilizing mission”, and on the other, was an apologist for the dictatorial power of Józef Piłsudski.