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VIEWPOINT

On Violence: A Response to Comments

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Abstract

This a reply to Emanuela Grama's and Kevin Platt's comments to my article "Emptiness Against Decolonization: Reflections from the Imperial Fault Line in eastern Latvia."

Like Lielciems's residents, I value small pleasures in a world that seems to be spinning out of control.[1] Engaging with Emanuela Grama's and Kevin Platt's responses to my article is one such pleasure. Lielciems's residents take pleasure in other things—sitting on the bench when it is sunny outside, talking to neighbors, working in their allotments, receiving grandchildren in the summer (though that is tiring and one needs to rest afterwards), reminiscing about their youth and watching television. Some, like Pēteris, a Latgalian, dream of finding a partner. At the age of eighty-nine, this may seem as far-fetched as the hopes for Chinese investment, but if investment is beyond one's control, finding a partner is not. Pēteris has already found a friend of a distant relative who is coming for a visit. He hopes that she will not be put off by the sorry state of Lielciems.

Do Lielciems's residents dream of empire in the way that sons of Extremadura, now a region of *España vaciada* (emptied Spain), dreamt of empire in Álvaro Enrique's novel mentioned by Grama in her comments? No. Do they agree with Aleksandr Dugin, who speaks of Eurasia and the need for Russia to pursue sovereign existence, understood as the ability to shape the world order? No. But insofar as they hope for their children to succeed in the empire's centers, sure, they dream of empire. Insofar as they remember the times when their work had value, sure, they dream of empire. What matters more than whether they dream of empire or not is the place and position they dream from, what they think empire can bestow upon them and whether they dream of a particular empire or more generally of an external power that could revitalize Lielciems.

Lielciems's residents can never be certain what visibility to and recognition from the Latvian state might bring. When Vasia, a Russian-speaker born in Ukraine, called the police because a neighbor's hound had killed Vasia's dog, the police took away the antenna that

[1] Thanks to Kevin Platt for rendering Lielciems into Bigville for English speakers. That was my way of marking the fact that Lielciems was a "an urban type of settlement" in Soviet parlance. It had been a village, but then obtained urban characteristics: a factory, a school, and a certain number of inhabitants. It was no longer a village, but not yet a city. So, I called it the big village.

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allowed Vasia to watch Russian television but did nothing about the killer dog. Thus, Lielciems's residents would rather be left alone.[2] Day in and day out, Lielciems's residents have other problems to deal with: Vasia spends days, weeks, and months piecing together bits of paper where he has recorded his short-term employment as a manual worker during the Soviet period, hoping to increase his *stazh* (number of years worked) and therefore his meagre pension. My former next-door neighbor, Nina, anticipates and fears packages from her daughter in England, because she does not understand how to make an electronic customs declaration and cannot get them on her own. Antonina's blood pressure jumps up and down, as does that of her neighbors. They spend hours talking about it, hoping tomorrow won't be worse than today.

Politics do enter the conversation, and sometimes the generic "they" Lielciems's residents use to mark power takes on more concrete forms. Antonina, a Latgalian, told me how in the 1990s, when everyone was ecstatic about restored independence, her grandmother, who had lived in Latvia in pre-Soviet times, told her that soon they—the younger generation—will see what capitalism really means. Volodia, a Russian man who came from Russia's Pytalovo that used to be Latvia's Abrene before World War II and therefore holds Latvian citizenship, cursed Vladimir Putin for the poverty of the borderlands. "Russia has everything, from shit to gold, but so many people are so poor. What does Latvia have? Nothing but trees."[3]

Some residents think that the solution to the problems that Lielciems is experiencing *as a place*—because the residents are as concerned about the fate of the settlement as they are about their own lives—lies beyond the powers of the regional government or even the nation state. They may be dreaming of empire, but they also recognize how economic and political power works in a relational imperial landscape. What kind of subjects are they? Is empire in their minds? How does this legacy matter if one takes cue from subaltern studies which "perceive imperial structures of domination also as a source of colonial agency that displaces and destabilizes these very structures from within."[4] In other words, if empires make us and not only break us, then which parts of empire are to be excised, which cultivated, and to what end?[5]

There are certainly resonances between my argument about the relational imperial landscape, Laura Doyle's *Inter-Imperiality* and Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz's *Shatterzone of Empires*: entities, from empires to their subjects, are relational.[6] But that is—or should be—the beginning of analysis rather than the end. This is to say that there is an important difference between my work and theirs—the imperial nature of the relations Doyle and Bartov and Weitz analyze is not contested or, at least, they write assuming that it is not contested. Bartov and Weitz are concerned with how local and national forms of violence develop in the borderlands of four empires (German, Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian),

[2] Emanuela Grama notes that Lielciems's ethnically Russian residents "could, in principle, apply for Russian citizenship and relocate to Russia." Some could, but not because they are ethnically Russian, and the procedure is quite restricted (see here: https://latvia.mid.ru/ru/consular-services/consulate/voprosy_grazhdanstva/citizenship4/). Quite a few of the ethnic Russians have Latvian citizenship, whether through descent or naturalization.

[3] Volodia, an interview, Lielciems, April 26, 2022.

[4] Sergei Oushakine, "Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space Between Hitler and Stalin," in Julie Buckler and Emily Johnson, eds., *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Evanston, IL, 2013): 300.

[5] For how the Soviet empire made national subjects, see Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism." *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 414–52; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union*, 1923–1939 (Ithaca, 2001); and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005).

[6] Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham, NC, 2020); Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, IN, 2013).

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some of them exceeding in brutality the violence of empire. Doyle suggests that empires compete, thus leading to intersecting forms of domination, but also creating possibilities for the dominated to maneuver between empires. And even though Doyle recognizes that subjects of decolonization are not outside the inter-imperial realm of domination, she argues for a politics of decolonization that strives for a non-imperial positionality, that is, emancipation not from one empire, but all. This is an illusion. And this is why Lielciems's residents are good to think with. They should not be taken to stand in for the Russian subject, the kind that dreams of empire the way fictional conquistadors do. The residents of Lielciems are not easily identified and do not claim identifications. They do not take refuge in subalternity as a subject position. They take refuge in a place, their place of residence, as long as it remains on the margins. They are, perhaps, the most subaltern of subjects in Latvia—no money, no political recognition, no future. Yet they were the Soviet empire's foot soldiers ("symbolic colonial subjects," as put by Grama) and are perceived by many as Putin's fifth column. They are the relational Other of the subject of decolonization, the Latvian national subject.[7]

The violence Lielciems's residents experience is not only political. Imperial power is not limited to territorial expansion and denial of recognition. Today's imperial power is diverse, diffuse, informal. Empires expand at a distance, with the help of capital, through technocratic means, and by offering gifts of civilization that are often readily accepted. The fact that Latvians focus on imperial oppression of national forms of self-realization is itself an empire effect, both Soviet and European. On the one hand, the Soviet empire made nations, on the other, these nations had been made in European political thought and practice. The Latvian national subject, like Lielciems's residents, has empire on its mind, especially when the end goal of decolonization is understood as affirmation of Latvian belonging to "western cultural space" (*Rietumu kultūras telpa*).[8] Why is it that so few people in Latvia and the region more broadly consider financial or military dependency on friends rather than enemies a sign of empire? Why is it that labor migration to the United Kingdom or Germany is not linked to the spatial division of labor in an inter-imperial terrain? If one voluntarily submits to imperial relations of subordination and considers the empire to be a friend, does it stop being an empire?[9]

We might also ask, therefore, do Latvians outside Lielciems—the national subject as represented in mainstream political rhetoric—dream of empire? What do they dream of, when they dream of freedom? If Lielciems' residents exhibit a version of postcolonial estrangement, the Latvian public subject overidentifies with empire. It is a case par excellence of colonial mimicry where empire desires "a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite," and where the Other complies with no ironic distancing whatsoever.[10] The Latvian subject is stuck in the fantasy of autonomy and does not recognize its "double subjection."[11] If it did so, it would have to recognize, at least in

[7] On the "Latvian subject," see Dace Dzenovska, "The Clash of Sovereignties: The Latvian Subject and its Russian Imperialism," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2022): 651–58.

[8] For an example of this line of thinking in Latvian public discourse, see Krista Burāne, "Rūgtās zāles," *Satori.lv*, April 17, 2024, at https://satori.lv/article/rugtas-zales (accessed January 14, 2025).

[9] This is another potential problem with Doyle's take on empire. She understands empire "as an expansionist state that achieves sustained control over the labor, finances, administration, and material resources of a foreign territory through political, financial, and violent coercion" (Doyle, *Inter-imperiality*, 7). But empires govern through consent as much as through coercion.

[10] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Men" The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28, (Spring, 1984): 126. For an application of the concept of colonial mimicry to relations between Latvians and Baltic Germans in the Russian empire's Baltic provinces, see Ivars Ijabs, "Another Baltic Postcolonialism: Young Latvians, Baltic Germans, and the Emergence of Latvian National Movement," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 1 (January 2014): 88–107.

[11] Oushakine, *Postcolonial Estrangements*, 307.

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theory if not in practice, that the desire to recover autonomy is to be forever frustrated. More than that: it entails inflicting violence on oneself and others.

In his commentary, Kevin Platt suggests a move from the language of empire to condemnation of violence but does so only with regard to Russia. I think we need to pose this question to all involved. As Bartov and Weitz's book suggests, it is not always the case that empires inflict more violence than those who resist them. In that sense, the Latvian subject is not only doubly subjected, but is itself the subject of violence. Perhaps, then, the question should be not who is to decolonize whom from what, but who is inflicting what kind of violence on whom, is any of it justified, and, if so, according to what criteria?

There remains the question of what to do if the political enemy picks up on your weaknesses. In other words, what do I say to Kevin Platt's point that Russia articulates its own version of anti-imperialism directed at the west that speaks to some in Lielciems and many in the Global South? I can only say that this calls for a separation of political stances and analysis, which might sound strange coming from an anthropologist trained in the United States, where the "personal is political." But there is such a thing as too much politics, when analysis is entirely subsumed by politics, thus hindering rather than aiding understanding. Contrary to Karl Marx's imperative to change the world rather than interpret it, today, it seems to me, we need as much interpretation as change.[12]

[12] Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, (Brussels, 1845), at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm (accessed January 14, 2025).

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