

Colonial Exceptionalism: Post-colonial Scholarship and Race in Czech and Slovak Historiography

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In spite of recent calls for the decolonisation of Czech and Slovak academia, there is still relatively little reflection of post-colonial theory in either Czech or Slovak historiography or related disciplines, including ethnology and Slavic studies. In the following essay I summarise the local discussion of coloniality and colonialism that has been going on since at least the end of the 2000s, while pointing out its conceptual limits and blind spots; namely the persistence of ‘colonial exceptionalism’ and the lack of understanding and use of race as an analytical tool. In dialogue with critical race theory as well as recent literature that deals with comparable ‘non-colonial’ or ‘marginal-colonial’ contexts such as South-Eastern Europe, Poland and the Nordic countries, I discuss how the local debates relating to colonial history as well as the post-colonial / post-socialist present of both countries would benefit from embracing the concept of ‘colonial exceptionalism’ and from including concepts of race and ‘whiteness’ as important tools of a critical analysis.

Key words: Czechoslovakia, colonial exceptionalism, post-colonialism, orientalism, race, whiteness

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, Czech politologist Pavel Barša declared a Barthian Degree Zero for the upcoming decolonisation of Czech academia. Amidst the uneven affluence and prosperity in the region on one hand, the upswing of popular nationalism and xenophobia in the wake of the so-called migration crisis on the other, and the immense challenges posed by global climate change, Barša claimed that it is no longer possible to cherish the vision of ‘Central Europe’ living in post-socialist splendid isolation from what is happening ‘out there’. As he put it: *Now that we have finally joined the club of*

the former colonisers, we have also lost the alibi of those being colonised. The decolonisation of our thought can finally begin (Barša, 2020).

Even though I don't share Barša's arguments,¹ I take it as critical to follow his call by addressing the following questions: Why and how shall we decolonise Czech academia? What would it mean, and what would it bring if we attempted to write Czech and Slovak, respectively Czechoslovak history into the global histories of Empire and Race? Contrary to what one might expect, such questioning does not need to start from zero. Since at least the late 2000s there has been a steady growth in the literature dealing with various aspects of coloniality and colonial history, even though most of this literature remained locked away in specialist niches, or lingered on the fringes of the established academic disciplines. It is thus already possible to look back at what has been produced in the last decade, and to consider the strong and weak points of the way in which various strands of post-colonial scholarship² have been adapted in Czech and Slovak historiography to date.

In the following I claim that, at least in historiography, the recent discussion still retains the premise of Czechoslovak (and/or Czech and Slovak) 'colonial exceptionalism', a premise that effectively obscures the many ways in which the region communicated and interacted with global Empires since the beginnings of Atlantic slavery and settler colonialism in the 16th century, up to the political decolonisation of the 1950s–1960s and the global reconfigurations of power at the turn of the 20th/21st centuries. Part of the problem, at least in my opinion, rests in the fact that historians from /of the Czech and Slovak region also struggle with the analytical concept of race, which is a pertinent, if not the central issue in the studies of coloniality. As in other presumably non-colonial regions of Eastern Europe, race – unlike ethnicity – often remains the least explored aspect of the local ideological landscapes. Race has been so far addressed mainly as a narrow topic associated with a limited number of histories, namely with Nazism and the holocaust, or with the histories of individual racialized groups, paradigmatically such as Jews and Roma. Far less attention has been paid to the possibility of deploying race as an analytical category. That is a research tool that would open up new research questions and help us better understand the ideological underpinnings of western modernity, including its Czech and Slovak variant. Hence, I argue that in order to improve the local debate on post-coloniality, it is necessary to embrace and elaborate on both the concept of race and to critically deal with the discourse of 'colonial exceptionalism'.

Finally, I would like to emphasise from the very outset, that the critical discussion I am suggesting here is not meant to become a moral cause aimed at identifying the 'complicity' of Czechs and Slovaks as potential 'perpetrators' in a supposedly 'criminal' system, that is colonialism.³ I am far from making such moral claims that would potentially lead into a blind alley of 'white guilt' regrets. Instead, I propose that historians should pay more attention to the many complicated ways in which the Czechoslovak

1 Cf. below to review my critical points.

2 (Post-)colonial scholarship here being an umbrella term for various approaches, ranging from the actual postcolonial studies in a narrower sense to the literature that critically deals with coloniality and its complex histories, chiefly by addressing questions of power and governance.

3 I would thus be rather cautious in dealing with the inherently moralising concept of 'colonial complicity', which is sometimes discussed in case of the countries that were supposedly less-intimately involved in the global colonial Empire (cf. Vuorela, 2009). By the same token, I don't share Barša's framing of the discussion in terms of a 'lost alibi'.

region has been involved in the global colonial Empire and that instead of making judgements, this critical journey should contribute to a critical history of the present. In other words, we have to critically deal with the past precisely because we need to imagine a different, and possibly better future.

‘COLONIAL EXPECTATIONALISM’

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) first came out in Czech translation in 2008, exactly thirty years after its original publication and some twenty years after 1989. Translations of other seminal works of post-colonial thought followed between 2011–2013, thanks to the activities of the tranzit.cz initiative in Prague (Vít Havránek and Ondřej Lánský); still, even in 2015, Horký-Hlucháň and Profant addressed the substantial lack of theoretical insight and general belatedness of the local discussions on post-coloniality (p. 13).

The reason for this delay, and for the limited impact of postcolonial thought in Czech and Slovak academia, has partly to do with the socialist and post-socialist legacy, as proposed recently by Barša and described similarly by other East Central European scholars (e.g. Grzechnik, 2019). Local intellectuals, long confronted with the state socialist official doctrine of internationalism and anti-imperialism, tend to embrace the perspective of ‘their enemy’s enemy’ and thus in turn find little sympathy with the emancipatory battles fought by the ‘Third World’ countries (Barša, 2020). Moreover, in the context of the post-socialist 1990s’ public discourse and project of catching up with the West, East Central European (ECE) countries took pains to distance themselves symbolically both from the ‘East’ (Buchowski, 2006) and from the ‘developing’ ‘Global South’, and/or pointed to their own misery as former ‘colonial subjects’ of Soviet Russia.⁴ In light of this attitude towards the ‘developing countries’ it was thus no surprise that the recent ‘migration crisis’ sparked such a fire in the ECE countries, as pointed out both by Pavel Barša and Marta Grzechnik.

The post-1990s ‘catching up with the West’ surely affected the belated response to post-colonial theory both in the Czech and Slovak context. The widely held, though as I would argue rather inauspicious, conviction that Czechoslovakia historically did not possess any overseas colonies and therefore was not involved either in colonialism or racism, has deeper historical foundations reaching back at least to the end of the 19th century. Since colonialism and colonial racism in its many forms laid the material as well as affective foundations for the project of European modernity, it is virtually impossible to leave any European country or region out of the equation (Baker, 2018b: 7). Still, countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, or for that matter even Switzerland or Denmark, obviously played different historical roles than did Spain and Portugal, later France, Germany and chiefly Britain. Positioned somewhere on the margins or semi/peripheries of European modernity, these countries developed specific colonial cultures, termed alternatively ‘marginal-colonial’ or ‘colonialism without

4 Marta Grzechnik (2019) pointed out the ideological aspects of these troubled analogies that feeded both into the anti-Russian sentiments and into the strategies of claiming belonging to Europe as used by different actors in the 1990s Poland. Ironically enough, Pavel Barša falls into the same trap when he speaks of Czechs ‘finally joining the club of colonisers’ and thus ‘losing the alibi of being colonised’, which implies that (1) Czechs wasn’t on the ‘colonising side’ of the universe before 1989, and (2) that they were indeed purportedly ‘colonised’ as former vassals of the Soviet Russia (2020).

colonies' (Purtschert, Falk, Lüthi, 2015). Whereas the local elites had oriented themselves since the Enlightenment towards Western modernity and took part in various colonial enterprises – such as the so called 'discovery' expeditions, trading with the 'Orient' etc. – the region itself remained the 'Other Europe', an object of exoticization (Wolff, 1994) and a mirror for the reflection of 'Western' imperial master narratives (Imre, 2005: 83).

This ambivalent position of East Central- and South-Eastern Europe as being historically both involved in colonialism and at the same time being marginalised for not being sufficiently modern, and not being sufficiently European, marks the historical persistence of what has been described as 'colonial amnesia' (Purtschert, Fischer-Tiné, 2015) or 'colonial exceptionalism' (Loftsdóttir, Jensen, 2012). I found the latter concept especially useful for thinking about the complicated ways in which Czechoslovakia had been involved in the global colonial Empire. Although originally defined in the context of the Nordic countries, whose histories obviously differ from that of the Czech lands and Slovakia, the concept manages to capture the simultaneous inscribing and erasing the respective party into/from colonial history, which historically played, and as Barša suggests still does play, an important ideological role. In what follows, I will consider the Czechoslovak 'colonial exceptionalism' as the relatively strong and persisting conviction that Czechoslovakia has been part of the project of Western modernity, while at the same time has been able to claim 'colonial innocence'. I argue that this should be critically addressed and studied as a substantial part of this region's past.

A very short history of Czechoslovak colonial exceptionalism would encompass the pre-1918 ideologies of nation-building that posited the Czech national body firmly within the coordinates of the 'white' colonial civilisation (Herza, 2019; 2020), while at the same time acknowledging the troubled position of Czechs and Slovaks within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the wider 'Western civilisation'. This could explain such unlikely phenomena as the phantasmatic identification of Czechs with the colonised natives of Northern America, which was clearly present in 19th-century Czech literature and in the local early-20th-century scouting and woodcraft culture (Jehlička, Kurz, 2013).⁵

Going further into the interwar period and the independent Czechoslovakia, I would ask how did the newly formed state position itself within the global structures of colonial empires, nation-states and mandate territories (cf. Lemmen, 2018)? What if we do not take the calls for the 'Czechoslovak Togo' or other overseas colonies as mere historical anecdotes and instead analyse how these colonial ambitions related to problems of governance 'at home', vis-à-vis the many nationalities, classes and ethnic groups⁶ in Czechoslovakia itself. Again, a narrative of 'colonial exceptionalism' would evince itself, e.g. in the widely held conviction that since Czechs and Slovaks were never colonial 'masters', they might be the most suitable candidates for establishing new colonial regimes, precisely because they would be able to deal with the 'natives' in a more 'democratic' way, then their former British or French rulers (Ibid.: 203–204). In other words, the idea of 'democratic colonialism', which was interconnected with the supposedly innate 'democratic' nature of Czechs (or Czechoslovaks) and the trope of

5 It would be interesting to compare the Czech affinity to 'Indians' with its German counterpart (cf. Penny, 2013) and also to confront this tradition with the historical participation of Czech and Slovak emigrants in the actual dispossession and displacement of Native Americans in the 19th-century USA.

6 With the difference between 'nationalities', 'classes' and 'ethnic minorities' itself being part of the critical analysis.

Czechoslovakia being an imaginary 'island of democracy' in Europe (Koeltzsch, Konrád, 2016), enabled the generation of a specific colonial discourse aimed not only at potential territorial colonies located overseas, but also at 'internal colonies': peripheralised parts of the historical Czech lands, Slovakia and above all Subcarpathian Ruthenia as a prominent laboratory of modernity, respectively a playground for the Czechoslovak 'civilising mission' (Holubec, 2014; Shmidt, 2018; Baloun, 2018).

I would suggest that the specific Czechoslovak 'colonial exceptionalism' found a continuation also in the period of state socialism, transformed into policies of internationalism and comradely collaboration with the 'Third World'. And finally, 'colonial exceptionalism' in its specific post-socialist version opens up interesting questions regarding, for example, the international human rights agenda of the newly formed states and the related negotiations on the place of Czechs and Slovaks in the European union and in the context of the 21st-century geopolitics.

To sum up, instead of taking Czechoslovak 'colonial exceptionalism' in its many historical manifestations at face value, we need to analyse it as a specific discursive strategy which enabled different historical actors to claim their rather insecure belonging to modernity/Europeanness, while at the same time symbolically distancing themselves from colonialism and effectively exonerating themselves from actual participation in colonial dominance (as producers, tradesmen, consumers, tourists etc.).⁷ 'Colonial exceptionalism' thus needs to be studied as part of specific local colonial cultures that prevailed in the countries that did not possess colonies, but were nevertheless still an integral part of the global colonial Empire. As I claim in the next step, we cannot fully understand this 'colonial exceptionalism', without bringing the category of race, respectively of 'whiteness' into the analysis.

BEYOND ORIENTALISM: RACING CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Post-colonial and de-colonial theory presents a rich and diverse body of thought that has been produced on many sites and from many different positions in the world marked by global hierarchies of power since the beginning of decolonisation in the 1950s. Besides the early authors such as Franz Fanon and Edward Said, a current Czech or Slovak postcolonial historian can benefit from a highly diverse body of literature, ranging from Indian/US subaltern studies (Sommer, 2009; Lánský, 2014), to current Latin-American post-colonial thought (Sušová-Salmien, 2012), some of which has been already introduced in the Czech and Slovak languages (for an overview cf. Pucherová, Gáfrík, 2012; Horký-Hlucháň, Profant & al., 2015; Jiroutová Kynčlová, Knotková-Čapková, 2017).

In spite of this theoretical diversity, and the improving availability of the related literature, Czech and Slovak historiography and related disciplines repeatedly turn to Edward Said's orientalism as their main theoretical reference. Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing interest in studying the historical relationship between the

⁷ In its emphasis on the insecure symbolical position of Czechs and Slovaks in discourses of Western modernity, the concept of 'colonial exceptionalism' captures the same ambivalence that has been pointed out by Sarah Lemmen in her 'noncolonial orientalism' (Lemmen, 2013). Unlike her, I am first broadening the scope outside the boundaries of the imaginary 'Orient' and secondly attempting to deconstruct the exonerating discourse produced by the historical actors instead of taking it as a matter of fact.

Czech lands / Czechoslovakia and the 'Orient'. There are the remarkable studies of East-Central-European 'Egyptomania' and oriental exoticism (Navrátilová, Míšek 2003; Havlůjová, 2005), orientalism in Czech and Slovak literature (Sabatos, Gáfrik, 2018) and multiple volumes dedicated to different travellers to Egypt and the Middle East, to scholars (Jůnová Macková, Navrátilová, Storchová, Havlůjová, Jůn, 2012; 2013), interwar Czechoslovak diplomats (Jůnová Macková, Navrátilová, Havlůjová, Jůn, 2014), tourists (Lemmen, 2018) and chiefly to the professional scholars of the Orient sent to the field by the Oriental Institute in Prague, which was established in 1928 (Born, Lemmen, 2014).

Less attention has been so far paid to other imaginary non-European spaces and their contact with the Czech and Slovak region (Křížová, 2019), respectively to the exoticizing representations of other presumably 'non-European' peoples,⁸ either in the mass popular culture in the Czech lands (Herza, 2020) or in the tourism and historical travel literature (Lemmen, 2018). Venturing both outside the classic 'oriental' settings in the Near East, Northern Africa, and the 'exotic' overseas, individual researchers have also identified orientalist representations produced by Czech and/or Slovak authors in the Balkans (Šístek, 2007; Malečková, 2018) another zone of 'otherness', associated with orientalism's cognate: 'Balkanism' (Todorova, 1997). Finally, individual scholars have also described orientalisng representations of interwar Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Ruthenes (Holubec, 2014; Shmidt, 2018), or even identified Czech orientalising of Slovaks and other presumably younger Slav nations as part of the late-19th-century folklore movement (Ducháček, 2019), or in the professional Slavic studies that developed in the interwar period (Glanc, 2009).

However productive it may have been in formulating and reframing previously unaddressed and under-researched aspects of Czech and Slovak history, orientalism also has its limits and blind spots. Coined some forty years ago, the concept has undergone important criticism during the past few decades. It has been rightly argued that orientalism in its original formulation only applied to the Western countries (Britain, France, USA), that it tended to homogenise the Western audience, losing sight of the heterogeneity of different orientalisms (Lowe, 1991), and most importantly that it ignored the gendered character of orientalism (Lewis, 1996). Most of this criticism does not apply to the aforementioned literature which, quite on the contrary, looks at the diversity of orientalist imagery outside the classic colonial centres. However, other strands of criticism clearly do apply, and they deserve our attention here.

It seems to me, that even the most productive strands of conceptualizing orientalism, such as the one proposed a decade ago by Michał Buchowski, only have limited analytical potential. Orientalism in his version signifies: ... *a way of thinking about and practices of making 'the other' as well as a 'set of mind' that creates 'social distinctions'* (Buchowski, 2006: 466). As such, it provides us with a looking glass that makes visible the often dichotomic ways of dividing past and present societies into 'us' and 'them' that in turn effectively produces social distinctions and hierarchies of power. However, I contend that we need a more refined optic in order to comprehend and deconstruct the complex images of 'self' and 'the other'. That is why we need race as a category of analysis.

It should not come as a surprise that we come upon race, when discussing colonialism.

8 Both those to be found outside and inside the geographical cum imaginary borders of Europe: such as Roma or Jews who were in many instances marked as non-European, although they have lived on the continent for centuries.

It has been argued, that colonialism as a modern way of governing, operated by means of a 'rule of colonial difference' (Chatterjee, 1993). In other words, the unequal power relations between the colonisers and the colonised have been legitimised by the supposed difference between the former and the latter. Although not necessarily being the one and only category of difference, race historically became one of the key differentials behind this 'rule of colonial difference' (Scott, 1995).

Quite characteristically, the absence of discussion about coloniality in ECE also leads to a limited scope of the local discussions about race, although the reasons for this may perhaps lay elsewhere. As pointed out by Anikó Imré and recently emphasised by Catherine Baker, race as a category of analysis has had a particularly difficult career in the so-called post-socialist Europe, which has to do directly with the persistence of 'colonial exceptionalism'. Imre argues that:

Race and racism continue to be considered concepts that belong exclusively to discourses of coloniality and imperialism, from which Eastern Europe, the deceased 'second world', continues to be excluded, and from which East European nationalisms are eager to exclude themselves. (Imre, 2005: 83)

As an effect, race and racism survived unmarked but embedded in many East-European societies and thus *remained perhaps the most poorly articulated factor in the relationship between official ideologies and people's fantasies during and since communism* (Ibid.).

The reasons for the lack of critical discussion about race and racism in the countries marked by 'colonial exceptionalism' clearly have to do with the fact that their participation in the global Empire remained fairly phantasmatic, lacking direct contact with the colonial 'others', and thus they remained unfettered by anti-colonialist critique and 'white guilt' (Ibid.: 84). However, it is also crucial to point out that the limited critical discussion about race in ECE has to do with the rich body of historiography as well as the pervasive memory culture of WWII, the Holocaust and Nazism.⁹ This in many cases leads to the narrowing of the problem of race and racism to the history of a very specific stream of racial thinking, which is the Nazi racial ideology, at the expense of other, less visible, though perhaps equally salient traditions of racial thinking, including those of Czech and Slovak provenience (cf. Herza, 2019).

Coming back to the point made recently by Barša, the fact that the local intellectual discussions so far rather neglected race as a relevant category of analysis also has to do with the binary nature of 'cold war' thinking and its 'post-socialist' derivatives. Catherine Baker, a critical race scholar of South Eastern Europe, recently pointed out that, as a continuation of this binary cold war logic, many scholars still tend to distinguish between the West, which is marked by colonialism and racism, and the East, marked predominantly by nationalism, socialism and ethnic violence, instead of seeing post-colonialism and post-socialism as two intertwined conditions, which is a point she shares also with anthropologists Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (Chari, Verdery, 2009). What I am suggesting here, in order to broaden and further develop the already existing research on Czech and Slovak 'orientalisms' and simultaneously to escape the 'post-socialist' binaries, is to study the Czechoslovak 'colonial exceptionalism' through the intersectional category of race.

⁹ This point certainly needs more critical elaboration than is possible here. I would like to thank Pavel Baloun for making me aware of the issue.

In order not to get misinterpreted, I ought to emphasise that by using race as a category of analysis, I mean deliberately its use as an analytical tool by which we 'dissect' social reality, including the historical theories and definitions of race and its equivalents. I work with the conceptualisation of race as a category of difference that refers to perceived differences between people (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 48–49). As part of the social reality, race (1) produces that which it refers to, including symbolical structures, social institutions, practices and subjectivities, and (2) enables a re/distribution of power between differently racialized actors.¹⁰

By stressing intersectionality, I further want to underline that race is not the only category at play. Across different cases, race comes interconnected with other categories of difference, namely with gender, class, age, dis/ability and other differentials. In other words, when studying orientalism and the creation of 'the other', we need to look 'under the surface' to make sense of the many kinds of 'otherness' involved in individual cases (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Luckily, such an approach does not have to start from scratch as there is already a good deal of familiarity with race theory in Czech and Slovak historiography, particularly thanks to Markéta Křížová and other scholars (2014).¹¹ The already-existing interest and exhaustive work done on historical racial classifications (Hrabovský, 2018), on studying racial discourses aimed at the internal or external racialized 'others', paradigmatically such as the Jews (Čapkova, 2005; Strobach, 2015; Frankl, Szabó, 2015) or the Roma (Baloun, 2019), may be, in my opinion, productively elaborated by including a critical account of the less visible, yet equally important category of 'whiteness'. To paraphrase Catherine Baker (2018b: 767), we may like to ask: how did the Czechs and Slovaks become 'white'?

Though it may seem strange, this is neither an absurd nor an irrelevant question. The chromatic vision of mankind, as divided into different races, historically developed in direct relation to colonial conquest and slavery (Stam, Shohat, 2012: 2–3) as well as in relation to the racialized vision of the European society itself. Questions about the essences and characteristics of individuals and groups, and their ability to 'have' freedom and self-governance, occupied the minds of liberal theoreticians in Europe since the Enlightenment (Stoler, 1995: 8–9, 123–124). A particular racial grammar thus underlined the very discourse of modernity in which the visions of whiteness conflated with bourgeois values which might lead to the fact that the working classes and women were sometimes treated as different races rather than equal citizens. In this context the category of 'whiteness' emerged as the dominant, but at the same time insecure, power position within the modern race imagery. Richard Dyer described it as having a) unstable, shifting boundaries; and b) inner hierarchies (Dyer, 1997: 19). Indeed, belonging to the 'white' race is not an obvious matter of fact; on the contrary it is a matter of power and it involves hard labour upon oneself. To become 'white' in the modern society means not only to have a fair complexion. Quite in the contrary, white emerges as an unstable set of bodily and affectual techniques, competences and practices, a particular way of self-management, that is implicitly or explicitly set against

10 This is an analytical concept of race that builds upon the work of the late Michel Foucault, and on the critical reinterpretations of his work by post-colonial scholars such as Scott (1995), and particularly Stoler (1995).

11 Sociological conceptualisation of race, which is close to the notion I am discussing here, has been introduced also by Tomáš Kamín and Tatiana Machalová (2003).

the racialized Other (Stoler 1995: 104–105). Consequently, ‘white’ has many different shades, in the sense that for example the working classes were historically considered less ‘white’ than bourgeoisie, and that the Eastern Europeans were sometimes less securely ‘white’ than their West European counterparts. Building upon critical whiteness studies, a postcolonial account of Czechoslovak and/or Czech and Slovak history would interrogate the already mentioned ‘colonial exceptionalism’ by looking at the insecure racial position of the local populations in the context of global power structures between the late-19th-century Empire and the post-1990s globalisation. This may, at least in my opinion, open up new research vistas, as well as bring more insight into the already researched issues.

It would be, for instance, very productive to include the category of whiteness into the research on historical Slavic studies. As already proposed by Tomáš Glanc, interwar Slavic studies operated on the basis of a ‘nesting orientalism’ (Bakić-Hayden, 1995), that enabled a reproduction of power hierarchies between the supposedly Slav brother nations, with Russians, respectively Czechs as the aspiring leaders of the Slav world (Glanc, 2009: 882). By accentuating ‘whiteness’ as a category of analysis, it would be possible to better understand the ambivalent position of Czechs and Slovaks as both a racialized (because Eastern European) group and as racializing others (namely Roma, Ruthenes etc.). Simultaneously this would lead to a better apprehension of the least researched aspects of historical Slavic studies such as their interconnectedness with eugenics and physical (racial) anthropology (Herza, 2019).

Other fields that would benefit from including race and ‘whiteness’ in their theoretical toolkits would be the studies of Czech and Slovak migration and diaspora. Despite the fact that US migration studies became one of the seminal fields for critical studies of ‘whiteness’, mainly in Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998) and Roediger’s *Working Towards Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (2005), studies of the Czech and Slovak diaspora still tend to emphasise the question of national or ethnic belonging while neglecting the category of race. It is almost paradoxical, that while there is a long tradition of venerating the famous Czech-émigré and simultaneously one of the main protagonists of US racial science Aleš Hrdlička (1869–1943), local scholars are usually blind to the fact that before 1924, Czechs in the USA were clearly considered less ‘white’, then the ‘old stock’ Anglo-Saxons: an assumption that troubled Hrdlička throughout his whole career (Oppenheim, 2010).

The recent boom in historical studies of state socialism would also benefit from analysing discourses and politics of race. Although the socialist regime defined itself as race-blind and declared its support for decolonial movements as part of the cold war power constellations, race clearly mattered in state socialism, as pointed out in studies on Roma during and after socialist Czechoslovakia (Sokolová, 2008; Shmidt, 2015; Donert, 2017). Finally, there is no doubt that race and whiteness would be useful categories in the study of the both pre- and post-socialist decades, including the debates surrounding international migration both from ‘the East’, particularly the Ukraine, South-East Asia (Vietnam) and recently from the ‘global South’.

To sum up, instead of embracing and reproducing colonial exceptionalism, historians of the Czech and Slovak region should critically address it as an important part of the local colonial history. I have argued that such a critical reflection is hardly possible without considering race and ‘whiteness’ as both crucial aspects of coloniality and as important categories of our analysis. I believe that these considerations open up a potentially fruitful research field and thus I hope this article sparks a productive

discussion among historians, leading to a better understanding of both the past and the present.

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