READING BACK BEYOND THE "POST" PREFIX. THE POLITICS OF THE SIGNIFIER POST-SOCIALISM AND ITS OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ENRICHMENT OF PARTICIPATORY MEDIA THEORY

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ABSTRACT
The article sets out to develop a post-socialist reading back into the past strategy, which combines the tactics of disarticulation and rearticulation. The intellectual-critical post-socialist strategies have often been (rightfully) used to critique contemporary societal configurations for allowing the problematic past to almost unconsciously impact on the present and for erasing, forgetting, essentializing or reducing that very same past. This article carefully raises a different question, going back into the past, bypassing the discontinuities to look whether we can import some of its concepts into the present. This reading back into the past strategy consists in other words of disarticulating "old" concepts from their original discursive frameworks, and re-articulating them within a (radical-maximalist) democratic framework. In order to ground this rescue operation, the article starts with an overview of a number of prefixed concepts (using both "post" and "trans") to show their complicated relationship with their original signifiers, and with the dislocations they try to capture. The article then uses these debates on prefixed concepts, and more specifically on post-socialism and post-colonialism, to identify a position within the intellectual-critical post-socialist tradition that allows a re-reading of the past, and a deployment of the tactics of disarticulation and rearticulation. The final part of the article illustrates the post-socialist reading back into the past strategy by focusing on the media and participation debate, attempting to rescue the potentially valuable concept of narodnost, in order to open up new ways of thinking about media and participation and to illustrate the strength of the post-socialist reading back into the past strategy.

KEY WORDS
post-socialism – disarticulation – rearticulation – media participation – narodnost – reading back – Soviet theory of the press

1. Introduction

Multiple layers of meaning are associated with the concept of post-socialism, these can be divided into two main clusters. One cluster of meanings denominates the temporality and spatiality of a societal-political transformation and is as such affiliated with area studies. The second cluster of meanings refers to the critical-intellectual frameworks that attempt to reflect upon these processes and unravel their complexities. Here, a conceptual affiliation with post-colonialism exists. If we really want to drive this point home: There are two post-socialisms[1].

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1   This is similar to debates on the postmodern, with the key distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism.

Mostly aligning itself with the second cluster of meanings of post-socialism and strongly insisting on the dialectics between past and present, this article opens with an analysis of the use of the "post" prefix and the instability of the signifiers that become prefixed. Through an overview of a number of prefixed concepts (using both "post" and "trans"), the complicated relationship of these prefixed concepts with their original signifiers, and with the dislocations they try to capture, is laid bare. At the same time this overview also retraces some of the similarities between the different prefixed concepts, as well as their interactions within this family of prefixed concepts. In the case of post-socialism, this for instance implies a close relationship with post-colonialism, but also with post-structuralism and postmodernism.

The complexity of the relationship between past and present is then used as a starting point of a potentially hazardous rescue operation. Clearly, one of the basic logics of post-socialism (in the latter meaning) is that the past is both continuous and discontinuous. This has often been (rightfully) used to critique contemporary societal configurations for allowing the problematic past to almost unconsciously impact on the present and for erasing, forgetting, essentializing or reducing that very same past. This article carefully raises a different question, going back into the past, bypassing the discontinuities it explores whether we can import some of its concepts into the present. This operation is sensitive and difficult, and requires the combined deployment of disarticulatory and re-articulatory strategies.

Focusing on the media and participation debate, this reading back into the past strategy consists of two phases. In the first (and preparatory) phase, the theoretical impact of Marxism and anarchism on the present-day media and participation debate is made explicit. It is argued that both frameworks have had a strong impact in feeding the emancipatory dimension that is central to this debate. The second phase is more daring (and will for this reason be combined with a series of disclaimers), as here the question is raised whether and how some of the key concepts of the Soviet theory of the press can enrich the current media and participation debate. More specifically, this article takes a closer look at the concept of *narodnost*, and takes on the difficult task of disarticulating it from its original discursive framework, and re-articulating it within a (radical-maximalist) democratic framework, in order to open up new ways of thinking about media and participation and to illustrate the strength of the post-socialist reading back into the past strategy.

2. The politics of the prefix[2]

The development of concepts is a human activity which is obviously situated at the core of humanity but also finds itself at the heart of the academic enterprise. Concepts structure and capture ever-fluid knowledges and realities, and offer tools for reflection and analysis. They grant access to thinking about and comprehending the multitude of practices and events, situations and processes, inner and outer worlds. But at the same time, they are always doomed to fail, partly because the knowledge producing systems have become less self-evident. Moreover, the implicit assumption of universal access to reality inherent to these concepts is also permanently frustrated by the sliding of the signifiers, at both the temporal and spatial levels. Concepts are grounded in different imaginary communities[3], where differences in the political, social, historical, economic, legal and cultural spheres impact upon their articulations.

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2   This part on prefixed concepts is grounded in a reflection on Trans-Reality Television (Carpentier – Van Bauwel 2010).

3   See Anderson 1991.

Derrida's (1998) notion of *différance*is one of the intellectual projects that allow capturing the inherent problems of the concept, as it theorizes the permanent deferral of meaning, which has to face an endless chain of signifiers. Conceptual diversification is also taken account through Haraway's (1988) notion of *situated knowledge.*Thirdly, Ernesto Laclau's (2005) use of the notion of the *floating signifier*, in combination with his universalism/particularism discussion, helps exemplify the structural contingency of concepts. The floating signifier, a signifier that is "overflowed with meaning" (Torfing 1999: 301), assumes different meanings in different contexts/discourses. In other words, the floating signifier shows us that concepts can take on different meanings, depending on their positions in distinct discourses. By meaning something very different in different contexualized discourses, they bear witness to the ability of concepts to cross discursive frontiers. As Laclau (2005: 133) puts it, the concept of the floating signifier allows us to "apprehend the logic of displacements of that frontier". Similarly, Laclau's discussion of the universal and the particular illustrates that it is impossible to ultimately fix meanings and concepts, as the universal is an empty signifier that always requires a particular, so that this particular can be universalized in order to (attempt to) saturate the universal. The universal cannot exist without the particular. To use Laclau's (1996: 57) words: "Now, this universality needs – for its expression – to be incarnated in something essentially incommensurable with it: a particularity."

However relevant these critiques on the stability and fixation of the concept are, we should not forget that concepts can refer to their own fluidity (and temporality), showing an intertextual awareness of their own significatory particularities. Concepts can thus become self-reflexive and self-critical, and expressions of their own restrictions. This process of conceptual self-reflexivity is partially embedded within the academic system itself, where debates about definitions of specific concepts are manifold and seen as a common academic practice. One illustration here is the often-used introductory remark that the concept being scrutinized should be regarded as a "contested notion". But sometimes, the fluidity of the concept is emphasized even more explicitly. In some cases, the concept is altered only slightly, by for instance adding or changing one of its letters. One example here is Robertson's (1995) concept of *glocalization*, a conflation of globalization and localization. But also Derrida's (1986) "quasi-transcendental"[4] concept of *différance* is an example of this strategy. In other cases, a prefix (like "post" or "trans"), with or without a hyphen, is added to a concept. Again, this addition allows authors to either critique the "original" concept, and/or to symbolize changed realities which require a conceptual reconfiguration. These prefixed concepts are more than a "group of 'post' [or 'trans'] philosophies reflecting the uncertainties of our age" (as Sakwa (1999: 125) claims in relation to post-communism); these modifications become expressions of the fluidity and self-reflexive nature of the concept.

2.1. Early generations of the politics of the prefix: postmodernism and post-structuralism

Two crucial examples of the politics of the prefix are postmodernism and post-structuralism, which obviously contain a break with their predecessors (modernism and structuralism). Although what the concepts of postmodernism and post-structuralism cover varies

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4   It is, as Derrida has remarked in his book *Glas*, a "quasi-transcendental" concept, insofar as the difference between words both engender meaning and forever defer meaning, *différance* serves as both the condition of possibility and the impossibility of meaning.

widely and some of their key practitioners have been reluctant to be explicitly grouped under these labels[5], we can still see both concepts as a clear critical reaction against an intellectual (and ideological) order that was seen as outdated and sometimes even as *naïve*. In the case of postmodernism, we can revert to Lyotard's (1984: 8) brief description of the modern and the postmodern in his *Postmodern Condition*.

> I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. […] Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.

More generally, the postmodern is seen as either a moment of rupture with the past, or the introduction of new ways of thinking that emphasize the rise of uncertainty, diversity, locality, changeability and indeterminacy. If we, for instance, take Ihab Hassan's (1982: 267–268) overview of the differences between modern and postmodern literature, we can see that modernism is associated with (amongst others) form, purpose, design, origin/cause and linear narration, whilst postmodernism is linked to anti-form, play, chance and difference. In other words, the "post" prefix is often used to signify a change in artistic, intellectual and societal configuration which opens up a wide variety of novel practices. Especially in the case of the less nuanced variations of postmodern theory, the "post" prefix indicates a clear and clean rupture with the past of modernism and the start of a different age where modernist logics have ceased to exist.

The idea of a clear-cut rupture or turn with the modernist past or practices has been fiercely criticized. A very brief formulation of this critique has been elaborated by Lethen (1986: 233): "The concept [of modernism] was constructed so as to form a dark background for the brilliant claims of Postmodernism." But to do postmodern theory some justice: even Lyotard (1984: 78) has pointed to the interwovenness of the modern and the postmodern, as illustrated by this (rather famous) quote: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant." Understandably, this nuanced position does not ignore the specificity of the postmodern, as captured in Lyotard's (1983: 82) calls to arms: "Let us wage a war on totality; Let us be witness to the unpresentable; Let us activate the differences, and save the honor of the name."

A similar logic of rupture applies to post-structuralist theory, as the "post" prefix indicates a break with and a critique of structuralism. Post-structuralism (to a greater extent than postmodernism) engaged in a critique on its intellectual predecessor, which partially had to do with the structuralist emphasis on method and methodology, and with the implications

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5   Foucault's resistance against being labelled a structuralist in telling in this respect: "In France, certain half-witted 'commentators' persist in labelling me a 'structuralist'. I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds that I have used none of the methods, concepts or key terms that characterize structural analysis. I should be grateful if a more serious public would free me from a connection that certainly does me honour, but that I have not deserved. There may well be certain similarities between the works of the structuralists and my own work. It would hardly behove me, of all people, to claim that my discourse is independent of conditions and rules of which I am very largely unaware, and which determine other work that is being done today. But it is only too easy to avoid the trouble of analyzing such work by giving it an admittedly impressive-sounding, but inaccurate, label." (Foucault 1970, xiv).

of this emphasis for the paradigm's knowledge construction. As Eagleton (1983: 141) puts it: "With the advent of post-structuralism, what seemed reactionary about structuralism was not this refusal of history, but nothing less than the very concept of structure itself." Structuralism was problematized through the notion of essentialism and its refusal to see the "structurality of structure" (Derrida 1988: 151). Post-structuralism relentlessly attacked and shattered the assumptions of stability that grounded the structuralist project, or in Young's (1981: 8) words: "In brief, it may be said that post-structuralism fractures the serene unity of the stable sign and the unified subject." Instead, post-structuralism emphasized how structures were inherently contradictory and unavoidably failed. This has consequences for the use of the "post" prefix, as its use implies a clear rupture with some of the core assumptions of structuralism, whilst at the same time still sharing some of its main focal points. Easthope (1988: 23 – emphasis in original) has summarized this position as follows: "The prefix 'post-' is serious not casual for post-structuralism gets its intellectual force by being both *after* structuralism and *because* of it, because of the limitations discovered in structuralism's project."

2.2. The proliferation of the "post" prefix

The use of the "post" prefix has not been limited to debates on postmodernism and post-structuralism, and a wide variety of other concepts have been developed, including the notion of post-socialism. Many of these concepts remain related to debates on postmodernism and post-structuralism. For instance Bell's (1973) concept of the post-industrial, which theorizes the shift from an industrial society to a service- and science-based and information-led society, is seen as one of the characteristics of the postmodern society. And Said's (1978) *Orientalism,* which played a crucial role in the development of post-colonial theory[6] with its focus on the articulation of (cultural) identities in once-colonized states, is very much indebted to Foucauldian post-structuralism. Moreover, through the intimate connection between post-colonialism and post-socialism, we can see some of the post-structuralist (and postmodernist) heritage at work in post-socialism as well.

In these three cases, the post-industrial, the post-colonial and the post-socialist, we can again witness the occurrence of a shift and/or rupture. In the post-industrial, there is a shift from the industrial to service economy; while in the post-colonial and post-socialist condition, the shift is situated in the recent past. Although there were earlier decolonization processes (like the break-up of the Austrian and Ottoman empires), especially the disintegration of the Western empires after the Second World War is seen as a key moment that feeds into post-colonial theory. In the case of post-socialism, the events of 1989–1991 provide the anchoring point for the study of the political transformations that affected a large number of nations in Eurasia and caused the collapse of party states and administered economies and their entry into capitalist economies. And yet again, these shifts are not to be considered total and complete, as the industrial, the colonial and the socialist continue to impact on (and in some cases to haunt) these "new" societies, resulting in many cases in hybrid mixtures of the industrial, the colonial, the socialist and what came afterwards.

As already indicated, the territorial emphasis in post-colonial theory generates a strong similarity with the concept of post-socialism (and post-communism[7]). As Chari and Verdery

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6   This is not to ignore the important antecedents of postcolonial theory, like the work of Franz Fanon.

7   Although the difference between post-socialism and post-communism is highly relevant, it will not be addressed here.

(2009: 10) argue, post-socialism "began as simply a temporal designation: societies once referred to as constituting 'actually existing socialism' had ceased to exist as such, replaced by one or another form of putatively democratizing state", but later a more critical angle on post-socialism was added, converging to the agenda of post-colonialism. When comparing post-colonialism and post-socialism, Chari and Verdery emphasize the rupture between what had been before, and what came after: "both 'posts' followed and continue to reflect on periods of heightened political change […] and both labels signify the complex results of the abrupt changes forced on those who underwent them: that is, becoming something other than socialist or other than colonized".

Intrinsically connected to the post-socialist (intellectual) agenda is the issue of Marxist theory, and the rise of post-Marxism. Without reverting to the discrediting discourse that – when the Wall came down – proclaimed not just the end of history but also the demise of the Marxist intellectual project, post-Marxism tried to deal with the class determinism and structuralism that characterized traditional Marxism. Especially the privileged role of the notion of class became one of the main objects of these reworkings, resulting in what Wood (1998: 4) called "the declassing of the socialist project", but what could be better termed its de-essentialization. Post-Marxists like Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 190) continued to situate themselves within the "classic ideal of socialism" and plead for a "polyphony of voices" in which the different (radically) democratic political struggles – such as anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-capitalism – are all allotted an equally important role. At the same time they did propagate the need to break with Marxist orthodoxy, keeping part of the intellectual inheritance intact, but still structurally modifying it[8].

2.3. (Re)signifying fluidity: the "trans" prefix

As the examples discussed above already indicate, the border between the "post" and "trans" prefixes is often blurred. But at the same time, the overview of the series of "post" prefixed concepts does indicate the presence of a rupture with a past situation or a set of practices or with an intellectual history, belief or reality. However present these discontinuities are, they are always accompanied by a series of continuities that bridge the past and the present. In the case of the "trans" prefix, we also see this oscillation of continuity and discontinuity, but there is a stronger emphasis on the process of change, on a simultaneous co-existence of what was and what has been transgressed, and on their fluid mergers.

Here, I would like to mention three examples, not accidentally all related to more culturalist approaches. First, the concept of the trans-national is seen (by Hannerz (1996: 6)) as a more "humble" version of globalization to describe "any process or relationship that somehow crosses state boundaries". Hannerz immediately juxtaposes the trans-national to the international, as the actors of trans-national processes are not confined to state actors, but "may now be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises, and in no small part it is this diversity that we need to consider" (Hannerz 1996: 6). But there is more, as trans-nationalism is not merely linked to acts of (state) boundary-crossing. Vertovec (1999) unpacks the different layers that characterize the trans-national, which can be seen as a social morphology (with ethnic diasporas as a prime example), a type of consciousness marked by dual or multiple identifications, a mode of cultural reproduction that is characterized by a "fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and everyday

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8   In contrast, neo-Marxism is used to explicitly articulate the embrace of the theoretical and conceptual inheritance of Marxism.

practices" (Vertovec 1999: 452), an avenue of capital (with trans-national corporations as example), a site of political engagement (represented by international nongovernmental organizations) and a (re)construction of "place" or locality (resulting in awareness of multilocality). This brings us to an understanding of the trans-national as a process that transgresses borders, but that also leads to co-existence and simultaneity, where multilocality and multiple identities are generated.

Very much related to the trans-national is the trans-local. In *The Production of Locality*, a book published in 1995, a chapter by Appadurai deals with the complex interplay between locality – more specifically neighborhoods – and context. He argues that context provides the constitutive outside of locality, but that locality simultaneously provides us with a context. To use his words: "The central dilemma is that neighborhoods both are contexts and at the same time *require and produce* contexts." (Appadurai 1995: 209 – emphasis in original). At the same time, the capacity of localities to produce their "own" context and subjectivities is affected by the "locality producing capabilities of larger-scale formations (nation-states, kingdoms, missionary empires and trading cartels)" (Appadurai 1995: 211). As argued elsewhere[9], the trans-local becomes the moment when the local is stretched beyond its borders, while still remaining situated in the local. The trans-local is more than "maintaining only limited, intermittent, episodic, financially uneven ties" (Barkan 2006: 15). As Broeckmann (1998) puts it, it is the moment where "different worlds and their local agents – individuals, organizations, machines – co-operate with global and nomadic agents within networked environments". Or in other words: "It is the moment where the local merges with a part of its outside context, without transforming itself into this context. It is the moment where the local simultaneously incorporates its context and transgresses into it. It is the moment where the local reaches out to a familiar unknown." (Carpentier 2008: 246). Similarly to the trans-national, the "trans" prefix of trans-local refers to the transgression of the local, combined with its expansion. In Appadurai's argument, locality is merging with its context, resulting in a fluid mixture in the local and what goes beyond the local.

Finally, the concept of the trans-cultural also offers an insight in the meaning of the "trans" prefix in cultural theory. In this case, it is well worth going back to the origins of the concept, as Fernando Ortiz defined trans-culturalism as a synthesis of two phases: the combination of "a deculturalization of the past with a métissage with the present" (Cuccioletta 2001/2: 8). Just like the trans-national, the concept of trans-cultural is juxtaposed to the intercultural (Thurlow 2008), where the latter is seen as too closely connected to what Streeck (1994) has called the "territorial view of culture" and linked to essentialist approaches. Thurlow expresses his preference as follows:

> I still prefer the sense transcultural creates of moving through and across cultural systems, in whatever way they may be constituted or conceived. It allows better, I think, for the fluidity of these systems, their porous boundaries and constantly reorienting expressions, as well as the conceptual spaces that open up between traditionally defined cultural systems […] that emerge between shifting patterns of sociocultural organisation and practice.
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> (Thurlow 2008)

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9   See Carpentier (2008).

Thurlow continues by emphasizing the connotation of trans-cultural as "beyond", which could be "signifying a transcending of essentialist or universalist ideas about culture as something unified, reified and possessed" (Thurlow 2008). This approach implies that the trans-cultural can still be seen as a meeting between different cultures, but this meeting becomes (seen as) a fluid encounter of cultural positions that are in themselves already hybrid assemblages. This again results in a perspective that emphasizes the process of merging still diverse identities, whilst denying any original position.These discussions on the "trans" prefix also allow going back to the concept of post-socialism, questioning whether the culturalist perspectives covered by the "trans" prefix can further enrich the concept of post-socialism, by pointing to the continued existence of what has been transgressed. Obviously, the existence and intensity of the rupture with the communist past should not be discarded. Here Fotaki's (2009: 141) words offer an important starting point:

> The transition from socialism to the market economy in the former Soviet Union and post-communist Europe is one of the most sweeping social transformations of the second half of the twentieth century. Drastic changes set in motion by the collapse of the model that combined a planned economy with authoritarian governance, have firmly established liberalism as the dominant narrative in contemporary public discourse.

At the same time, the notion of rupture is treacherous, as it evokes the idea of a *tabula rasa*. Especially in the celebratory context of the fall of the Wall, this idea of a radical rupture with the past was strengthened by "discourses evoking images of a Manichean struggle and of a tortuous path from the darkness of totalitarianism to the light of liberty" (Fotaki 2009: 142). Partially a strategy for establishing a new (neo-liberal) hegemony in the formerly communist countries, partially a purging ritual, these discourses ignored the complexity of the cultural and the lessons learned from post-colonial studies. As Said puts it in his 1995 *Afterword* in *Orientalism*, "[post-colonialism's] use of the prefix 'post' suggests not so much the sense of going beyond" (Said 1995: 350), but a combination of continuities and discontinuities. A metaphor that can be used to (hopefully) clarify this is the palimpsest, a reusable medieval writing tablet. As a palimpsest could never be entirely rubbed clean, "over time, and with successive reuses layers of prior scripts would build up over which the current one was written" (Crang 1998: 192). To use a more discourse-theoretical language: discursive formations can change through dislocations, but new discourses will still (have to) be articulated with existing and already sedimented discourses, a process which will affect both the already sedimented discourses and the new discourses. A second lesson to be learned from post-colonial studies is the need to continue a critical approach. After having emphasized the complex nature of change in his *Afterword*, Said (1995: 350) immediately moves on to call for a critical approach aimed against the replication of the old hegemonic colonial order in the new post-colonial order, approvingly quoting Shohat (1992: 106): "[post-colonialism's] emphasis is on the new modes and forms of the old colonialist practices, not on a 'beyond'." Or to use Gregory's (2001: 612) words: "[T]he idea of writing 'post'" not only implies an "after" but also incorporates meanings like "'against the grain of' and 'in the knowledge of' colonialism".

2.4. Rescuing treasures from the past

The idea of a post-socialist métissage of old and new social realities is not necessarily societally accepted, and often meets resistance. Apart from blatantly denying the past overflowing in the present, this resistance consists of a discursive return to a romanticized and essentialized past (quite reminiscent of the logics of the Negritude movement in the countries from the global South). As Lagerspetz (1999: 377) has illustrated, this return can, for instance, be found in the reference to "an allegedly democratic experience of the years preceding the Second World War". In this process of the misrecognition of continuity are the logics of amnesia and nostalgia, which are used to solidify the idea of the radical rupture with the past, by forgetting and erasing it. Here we can find support in Jameson's (1983) work on postmodern culture, and his perspective on amnesia, described as:

> the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.
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> (Jameson 1983: 125)

At the same time nostalgia functions as a key protective strategy, as it allows societies to work through the past as past, again (partially) severing the ties between past and present, even if this past is desired for. This has consequences beyond the way we see our past, as Jameson (1983: 118) argues: "We seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach." Without desiring to frame nostalgia exclusively as a problem (as it does allow going back into the past and can generate pleasurable affects), nostalgia does indeed tend to block access to the interconnectedness between past and present. By severing the temporal continuities, the present becomes intensified, a process that Jameson (1983: 120) exemplifies by Lacan's analysis of schizophrenia: "Note that as temporal continuities break down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and 'material': the world comes before the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy."

In a critical-intellectual post-socialist project, fed by a post-colonialist perspective, it becomes crucial to resist the processes of amnesia, and to focus on the connections that link the past with the present, to see that the present is "distinctively inflected by the socialist past and narratives of the past" (Hemment 2003), to see the continuities, and not just the discontinuities. Also, we should not give up on the critical perspective, but scrutinize both the past and the present, focussing on what has been lost but should have been kept, and on what has been gained but would have better been lost. This critical perspective also allows us to avoid replacing the jumping universe logics (to use a concept from Jencks (1997)) with a linear discourse of progress, which would be equally problematic. In contrast, we should see the past as co-determining the presence, with all its rigidities and fluidities, continuities and discontinuities.

We should also keep in mind that the past is a conceptual reservoir, whose elements are possibly worth the effort of (re)articulating. We can uncover them – not unlike the archeo-genealogist – and carefully (re)discover what is termed naïve, idealistic, past history or

radical, salvaging the treasures from the wreckage of the past. A crucial condition for this type of discursive rescue operation is the definition of the social as structurally open and contingent. The mere transposition of (almost) forgotten signifiers, without foreseeing the possibility of articulatory practices that allow re-articulating all – both old and new – elements, would only enhance nostalgia and limit the potentiality of social change. This means that concepts need to be detached from their totalitarian usages, that they should be reassessed for their usability in a contemporary media context and re-articulated within a democratic framework. When democracy is defined as a process that is never completed and always "to come" (Mouffe 1997: 8), these elements can provide us, in Europe and beyond, with the building blocks to further enrich our media systems and democracies.

This type of project is not new. Allow me to remind you of Žižek's (2002) re-reading of Lenin in *Revolution at the Gates*. Žižek (2002: 11) argues that the relevance of this project can be found in Lenin's "fundamental experience" of "being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which the old co-ordinates proved useless". Žižek shies away from the nostalgic re-enactment of revolutionary glory and from a pragmatic readjustment of the old Marxist-Leninist projects, but wants to repeat the "Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism" (Žižek 2002: 11). Žižek realizes the dangers of this move, and it is no coincidence that his introduction starts with the following sentence: "The first public reaction to the idea of reactualising Lenin is, of course, an outburst of sarcastic laughter." (Žižek 2002: 4). But he has not been the first one to embark on such a risky intellectual project. Similarly, Chantal Mouffe's (1999) re-actualization of Carl Schmitt's work, one of the so-called *Schreibtischtäter* (or intellectuals that supported (and enabled) the Nazi regime), has many similarities, and faces the same problems. She too feels the need to legitimize her articulation of the work of one of the legal and political theorists of the Third Reich into her post-Marxist intellectual project. In the introduction, Mouffe (1999: 1) writes: "In spite of his moral flows, he is an important political thinker whose work it would be a great mistake to dismiss merely because of his support for Hitler in 1933 [until 1936]. No doubt Schmitt is an adversary, but an adversary with remarkable intellectual quality […]."

Finally, before elaborating on a trajectory which might be relevant for communication and media studies, I should also stress that this reading back into the past cannot be placed outside the context of the old East-West divide, and all the problems this still invokes in the contemporary European configuration. Stenning and Hörschelmann's (2008: 328) statement that "we're all post-socialists now" might be overdoing it slightly, but they do remind us that the West was also shaped by the projects of communism and the Cold War. At the same time, there is still a persisting tendency to marginalize the Central and Eastern European experiences (Stenning – Hörschelmann 2008: 314), which also impacts on our knowledge production. As Robinson (2003: 278) remarks, Western frameworks are still often seen "as generative of theoretical and general geographical knowledge", resulting in other contexts being "incorporated as add-on 'case studies'". This global and European discursive configuration necessitates a careful positioning for a Western European author like myself, as the type of reading back into the past strategy[10] that I advocate can only

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10 The reading back strategy is used in a similar fashion as Said used his talk back metaphor, although there is a stronger emphasis on the temporal than on the spatial dimension.

work when it is a meeting between two parts of Europe – once artificially separated – that is based on a balanced dialogue where all traditions are equal (discursive) partners, and a centre vs. periphery logic is avoided.

3. Bringing the post/trans debate to media studies: reading back into the past

To illustrate the reading back into the past strategy, I want to do two things. First, I want to look at how Marxist and anarchist theory have been and can be used to contribute to contemporary debates on media and participation. Second, I want to revisit the Soviet press theory, and investigate how it can be re-articulated within these debates. It is especially the second objective that merits the same careful manoeuvring and the use of the same type of disclaimers as used by Žižek (2002) and Mouffe (1999) in their re-articulation projects, as I would be uncomfortable (to say the least) to align myself with a totalitarian project. But at the same time we should also accept the legitimacy of revisiting the past, to see how, on the one hand, some of the basic principles of Marxist and anarchist thought have impacted on the present-day media configuration and debates on the media and participation, but also to see – on the other hand – how we can enrich these debates even further by going back to some of the old Soviet press theory concepts. Particularly the concept of narodnost[11] will be the focal point here.
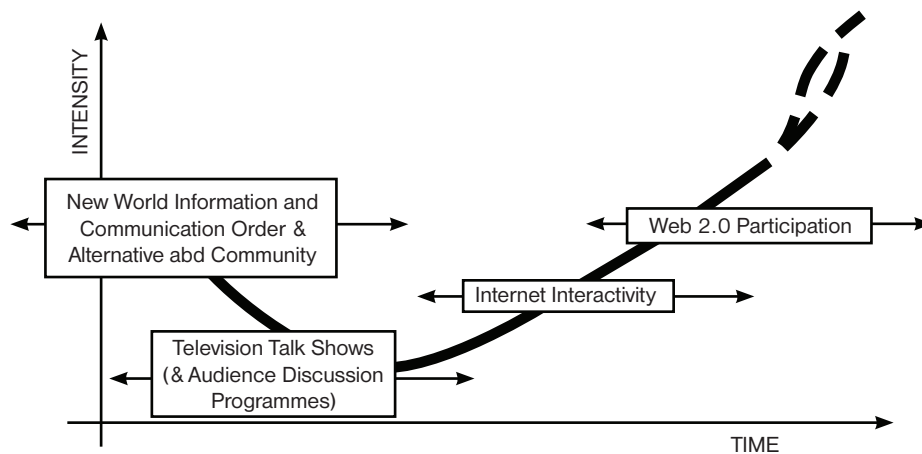
3.1. The media and participation debates

But allow me to first (and briefly) sketch the media and participation debates. Especially with the advent of "new" Internet-based media, discourses on the democratization of media regained strength. While initially the concept of interactivity became one of the nodal points of the democratization discourse, pushing the "old" concept of participation to the side[12], the development of web 2.0 placed participation centre stage again.

But these contemporary debates about Web 2.0 participation are part of a long history of debates on the democratic capacity of media technologies (see figure 1). Already in the 1970s, the UNESCO debates about the *New World Information and Communication Order* (NWICO) a crucial role, together with the rise of the community (and alternative) media movement. A second major upsurge of these participatory practices (and societal debates about them) was related to the Internet and later Web 2.0. In the 1980s and 1990s, participation was not high on the societal agenda, but we still saw a wave of mainstream television talk shows that allowed for audience participation. Their participatory intensity was relatively low, but their emancipatory potential still remained considerable. Obviously, none of these technologies (and the organizations in which they are embedded) has disappeared; all of them have managed to sustain themselves over time. Moreover, each of these examples of mediated participatory practices has specific characteristics, (co-)determined by a matrix of technological, organizational, economic, social and cultural features.

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11 While its broad meaning refers to a particular mixture of nationality and ethnicity, narodnost here gains a more specific meaning, which shall be explained later.

12 The main exception was in political studies, where 'new' media were seen as potential sites for direct democracy and strong forms of participation.

figure 1: A selection of (debates on) participatory media technologies and their participatory intensity.

In order to further theorize media participation, we need to distinguish between participati-on "in" the media and "through" the media, in a similar way that Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) distinguished between democratization "in" and "through" the media. Participation "in" the media deals with the participation of non-professionals in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media decision-making (structural participa-tion). These forms of media participation allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life and to put their right to communicate into practice. Second, these forms of micro-participation are to be considered important because they allow people to learn and adopt a democratic and/or civic attitude, thus strengthening (the possible forms) of macro-participation. Verba and Nie (1987: 3) briefly summarize this as follows: "A participatory polity may rest on a participatory society." Although mainstre-am media have attempted to organize forms of audience participation (Livingstone – Lunt 1994; Carpentier 2003; McNair et al. 2003), especially alternative media have proven to be more successful in organizing more deepened forms of participation in the media (Girard 1992; Downing et al. 2000; Rodriguez 2001).

Participation "through" the media deals with the opportunities for extensive par-ticipation in public debate and for self-representation in public spaces, thus, entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation (Couldry 2003). Starting from a broadly defined notion of the political, consensus-oriented models of democracy (and participation) emphasize the importance of dialogue and deliberation and focus on col-lective decision-making based on rational arguments à la Habermas. Other authors (Fra-ser 1990; Mouffe 1994) put more stress on conflict-oriented approaches. They point to the unavoidability of political differences and struggles and see the media as crucial sites for struggles for hegemony (Kellner 1992: 57). Both consensus and conflict-ori-ented models can emphasize the need for citizens to participate in these processes of dialogue, debate, and deliberation.

Both types of participation ("in" the media and "through" the media) see the (mass) communicative process not as a series of practices that are restrictively controlled by media professionals, but as a human right that cuts across entire societies. This is translated into the concept of the right to communicate, which was originally proposed in 1969 by the French civil servant Jean d'Arcy. The right to communicate aims to broaden

the right to be informed, which is embedded in article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Although the definition of the right to communicate was highly debated, Richstad and Anderson wrote in their 1981 book *Crisis in International News*, that theright to communicate includes (amongst other rights) the right for active participation in the communication process. The traditional Western right to be informed is thus transcended, and "communication is […] seen as a two way process, in which the partners – individual and collective – carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue" (MacBride 1980: 172).

3.2. Marxist and anarchist media studies and the media and participation debate

These debates about media and participation also have a clear political-ideological dimension, so it is hardly surprising that they are being fed by a number of ideological-theoretical frameworks (like Marxist or anarchist theory).

First of all, Marxist theory (in the broad sense, including neo- and post-Marxism) has directly or indirectly contributed to media studies in a wide variety of ways (Wayne 2003), including through the political economy of communication and through cultural media studies. Mosco (1996: 25) defines the political economy of communication as "the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources", and analyzes processes of commodification, spatialization and structuration. basic argument here is that the communication industry follows the more general capitalist logics, as the following quote from Mattelart (1979: 36) exemplifies:

> The manner in which the communication apparatus functions, which determines the elaboration and exchange of messages, corresponds to the general mechanisms of production and exchange conditioning all human activity in capitalist society.

More specifically, one of the main concerns is based on the colonization of public spaces, where the (growing) domination of corporate power in the communication industry is deemed problematic for media production, distribution, content and reception. We can also find a similar concern in cultural media studies, however, elaborated through a mixture of (post)structuralist and (post)Marxist theory. Here, the focus is placed more on the hegemonizing capacities of media, and the (potential) diversity of audience interpretations. An early example can be found in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (1978), where Stuart Hall and his colleagues researched the moral panics caused by the appearance of a "new" form of criminality (mugging), and the way it supported a dominant societal (repressive) order. Other authors in the field of cultural media studies, like McRobbie and Gilroy have focussed more on problematic (stereotypical) representations of gender and ethnicity.

Apart from producing a series of harsh critiques on the functioning of the communication industries, both projects have attempted to counter the domination of capitalist media structures and cultures, and increase the participation of "the" people, albeit in different ways. Despite these differences, both projects aim to redress the structural imbalance between the (mainstream) media systems and the representations they generate on the one hand, and the communicative needs of and opportunities for audiences and publics on the other. This also implies that the bourgeoisie vs. proletariat opposition

has been translated into a more fluid and post-Marxist (media) elite (or power-bloc) vs. the people opposition (Hall 1981; Fiske 1993).

In the case of the political economy approach, the emancipatory agenda was built on the need for structural reform (which could be evolutionary or revolutionary, in some cases resulting in a plea to seize the means of (media) production). In a softened-down version, through the mediation of the Western social-democratic ideologies[13], we can still find traces of these logics in the *public service model*, which combines public owner-ship with its remit oriented towards a cultural-pedagogic logic, strengthening civil society and democracy and creating social cohesion (Brants – De Bens 2000: 16–17). Picard describes the identity of the public within public service broadcasting/media as follows: "[public service] media are viewed as instruments of the people, public utilities through which the people's aspirations, ideas, praise and criticism of the state and society may be disseminated."

A more radical example here is Negt and Kluge's (1983) concept of the proletarian public sphere, based on the idea that "only when they [the workers] organise themselves in a form of a public sphere, do they develop at all as interests and are no longer mere possibilities". In addition, relatively significant attention has been paid to alternative media organizations, as they can structurally bypass the mainstream media. Already in 1980, Mattelart and Piemme (1983: 413) wrote: "A new definition for the idea of public service must be found, one which integrates both old and new technologies, as well as the national and local context. The basis of this new definition should be the relation to active groups, whether or not they are institutional." The resistance (of these active groups) to professio-nalized media is seen as one of the reasons for the origin and existence of the community media movement in which an anti-elitist discourse is to be considered crucial (McQuail 1994: 131; Girard 1992).

In the case of cultural media studies, the emancipatory potential has initially focused on the active audience. Through the possibility of counter-hegemonic decodings, which were oppositional to dominant encodings (Hall 1993), the possibility of resistance to hege-mony was incorporated into the analysis of media practices. Using a broader perspective, Fiske (1989) emphasized the progressive (but not revolutionary) nature of popular culture. As he put it: "the reading relations of popular culture […] are always relations of domination and subordination, always ones of top-down power and of bottom-up power resisting or evading it" (Fiske 1989: 168). Through the resistant reading practices, audience members can reclaim control over the meanings that circulate through the communication industries, and incorporate them into their everyday lives. Another cultural media studies strand focu-ses on fan cultures and their capacity to poach mainstream media products (Jenkins 1992). Through this focus, more emphasis is placed not only on participatory practices at the levels of consumption and production, but also within the fan communities themselves. Not surpri-singly, this cultural media studies strand has also migrated into the field of participation and new media, for instance with Jenkins' work on *Convergence Culture* (2006).

Moroever, from an anarchist theory perspective, there have been some substantial con-tributions to the media and participation debates, as the focus of anarchist theory has not always been placed on the state as such. A number of authors have pleaded to incorpora-te more societal spheres, claiming that there is "no final struggle, only a series of partisan truggles on a variety of fronts" (Ward 1973: 26). Especially post-structuralist anarchist

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13 Picard (1985: 69) defines the social-democrat project as "modern Marxist thought combined with writings of classical liberal philosophers".

theory has enabled a more complex analysis of the power of various societal spheres. Through this broadening of the scope, combined with the very necessary de-essenti-alization of anarchist theory, the media system has become one of the many possible sites of analysis. Support for this repositioning of anarchist theory can firstly be found in the importance generally attributed to contemporary (mainstream) media systems, their symbolic power and their perceived potential as new governing bodies that (re)produce hegemonies, which renders them necessary targets for anarchist critique. On a more positive note: The potential of these media systems to stimulate a more participatory cul-ture and to enhance a semiotic democracy also legitimizes attention from an anarchist perspective.

It is in particular the more Chomskian strand of anarchist theory that has incorporated the vitriolic critique of the mainstream media system, although even alternative media sometimes share in these critiques, as Bradford's (1996: 263) analysis of pirate radio suggests. Apart from the traditional problems with the remnants of essentialism, these media analyses are often characterized by a rather fundamental distrust of technology, which is seen to reinforce "class and hierarchical rule by adding powerful instrumentalities of control and destruction to institutional forces of domination" (Bookchin 1996: 26).

Some authors have managed to incorporate anarchist theory in a more balanced way. Downing, in his *Radical Media* (2001: 67 ff) distinguishes two models for the organiza-tion of radical media organizations: the Leninist model and the self-management one. He (2001: 69) explicitly relates the latter model – where "neither party, nor labor union, nor church, nor state, nor owner is in charge, but where the newspaper or radio station runs itself" – to what he calls a "socialist anarchist angle of vision". Although Downing mainly points to the problems caused by this "angle of vision" (see below), his theoretical reflections and case study analyses clearly link self-managed media to the anarchist tradi-tion. The second author to mention here is Hakim Bey – which is Peter Lamborn Wilson's pseudonym – who reflects on the upsurge (and disappearance) of temporary anarchist freespaces in his essay entitled *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1985). Here he distinguis-hes between the *Net* and the *Web*, where the Net is seen as the "totality of all information and communication transfer" (Bey 1985: 106), whilst the Web is the counter-net that is situated within the Net. In the Web, media technology does indeed play an important (although not all-determining) role:

> The present forms of the unofficial Web are, one must suppose, still rather primitive: the marginal zine network, the BBS networks, pirated software, hacking, phone-phreaking, some influence in print and radio, almost none in the other big media […].
>
> (Bey 1985: 107)

Interestingly, both Downing and Bey use the island metaphor, but in an inversed way. Downing (2001: 72) critiques anarchist theory for being satisfied with creating "little islands of prefigu-rative politics with no empirical attention to how these might ever be expanded into the rest of society". Bey, on the contrary, celebrates (the temporality of) the islands in the Net, replacing the permanent revolution by the temporal uprising, legitimized by the argument that "our own particular historical situation is not propitious for such a vast undertaking" and a "head-on colli-sion with the terminal State, the megacorporate information State and the empire of Spectacle and Simulation" will only result in "futile martyrdom" (Bey 1985: 98).

3.3. Soviet theory of the press and the media and participation debate

So far I have discussed some of the obvious and rather harmless links between Marxist and anarchist theory and contemporary debates on mediated participation. But one question remains: How can "the" Soviet press theory enrich these debates? Can we use a post-socialist perspective (which will allow avoiding the radical rupture trap) on the Soviet press theory? Clearly, the Soviet press theory has been discredited by its translation into a totalitarian practice within the USSR and the Central and Eastern European countries, and by the many critiques launched against it, also by Western European and US ideologists, as exemplified by the *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert et al.1956).

So care should be taken not to align oneself with totalitarian practices. One post-socialist strategy to deal with this problem is to bracket the praxis and focus on the theoretical concepts, which can be (at least potentially) articulated within a democratic discourse. Then we can deconstruct the Soviet press model, disarticulate its diverse elements, and look for suitable candidates for re-articulation within a democratic discourse. Here, Hopkins' (1970: 34) overview (which is similar to McNair's (1991: 18) overview) of basic principles is a helpful starting point:

> (1) Party orientation (partiinost), which may be interpreted as conscious acceptance that the press is a politically partisan institution, and it therefore expresses party philosophy and goals; (2) high level of ideology (vysokaya ideinost), which suggests that the mass media should be spiritually reinforced with the ideology of Marxism- Leninism; (3) truthfulness (pravdinost), an obligation to transmit information truthfully; (4) popular orientation (narodnost), which reminds the Soviet press of its responsibilities toward the masses, and simultaneously of the people's access to the publicly owned press; (5) mass character (massovost), which not only maintains that the Soviet press serves the masses, but functions among them; and (6) criticism and self-criticism (kritika and samokritika), which calls upon the press to criticize failures and faults of the Communist Party, the government, and their agencies, as well as to criticize its own performance.

Although each of these principles merits an in-depth debate, the vanguard idea behind the party organization principle (1), which produces a strong presence and privileging of a specific ideological framework (2), which then in turn mediates the principle of truthfulness (3) makes these first three principles less likely candidates for re-articulation within a democratic framework. On the other hand, notions of criticism and self-criticism, and especially the concepts of narodnost (and massovost) have potential for re-articulation and for enriching the debates on participatory communication. If we zoom in on narodnost, we can see that this concept – which Hopkins (1970) translates as popular orientation, and McNair (1991) as accessibility – serves a number of purposes. First of all, it articulates media organizations and their media professionals as representatives and part of "the" people. At least theoretically, narodnost disarticulates the elitist element from the media professionals' identity and replaces it with them being representative or being part of "the" people, working with them in partnership. Second, the concept also structures the content, as narodnost also implies a strong focus on the lived experience

of "the" people. This brings Inkiles (1956: 140, quoted in McNair 1991: 26) to the conclusion that in the 1940s "not events but social processes are treated as news and regarded as being newsworthy […]. Events are regarded as being news in so far that they can meaningfully be related to the process of socialist construction". 's example (1972: 339) from the 1918 Pravda contains a similar argument:

> We do very little to educate the people by living, concrete examples and models taken from all spheres of life, although that is the chief task of the press during the transition from capitalism to communism. We give little attention to that aspect of everyday life inside the factories, in the villages and in the regiments where, more than anywhere else, the new is being built, where attention, publicity, public criticism, condemnation of what is bad and appeals to learn from the good are needed most. Less political ballyhoo. Fewer highbrow discussions. Closer to life. More attention to the way in which the workers and peasants are actually building the new in their everyday work, and more verification so as to ascertain the extent to which the new is communistic.

This does not imply that the content should be populist or vulgarized, as Lenin (1972: 344) argues in his *Thesis on Production Propaganda*:

> This newspaper, devoted to matters of production, should be a popular one, in the sense of being understood by millions of readers, without falling into vulgarisation. This paper should not descend to the level of the uncultivated reader, but should work steadily – and by vary gradual degrees – to promote his development. […] Top priority should be given to a single economic plan, to the labour front, production propaganda, the training of workers and peasants in the work of administration, to seeing that Soviet laws and measures established by Soviet institutions are given due effect, and to an extensive and properly organised exchange of opinions with the rank-and-file reader.

This brings us to the third component of narodnost, which is the accessibility of the press to its audiences. The above-mentioned "exchange of opinions" system in the form of readers' letters was extensively used: McNair (1991: 25) refers to Alfyorov, who claimed that the Soviet media received 60–70 million letters each year. This was combined with the worker-peasant correspondent system, endorsed by the 8th party congress in March 1919, and structured through Rabselkor (the Movement of Worker and Peasant Correspondents). Although again in practice, the worker-peasant correspondents were objects of surveillance and disciplining (Gorham (1996) calls them "Tongue-tied writers" – see also Kenez (1985: 233–234)), the concept was aimed at providing media access to non-professional writers. By providing media access, narodnost also contributed to the media's watchdog role, exposing the dysfunctions of the state and economic apparatuses (Štastná 1985: 293), which is the fourth component of narodnost.

   The above-rendered citations of Lenin also exemplify the difficulties in disarticulating and then re-articulating elements of the Soviet theory of the press. Narodnost served the ideological, educational, propagandist objectives by showing the achievements

of socialism in the realm of everyday life, evidenced by Lenin's (1972: 339) call for "verifi-cation so as to ascertain the extent to which the new is communistic." Through the focus on the everyday and its economic context, the totalitarian political system also moved itself out of sight, placing itself outside public scrutiny. This move is symbolized in Lenin's (1972: 339) plea for "political ballyhoo". Obviously, the mediation of naradnost through the concept of pravdinost also renders its meaning specific, as truth was a Marxist-Leni-nist truth. This framework obviously impacted on what could be said in public, leaving little room for democratic pluralism.

At the same time the contemporary debates on media and participation (in the East and the West) can be deepened by the conceptual richness of the narodnost. Firstly, it opens up the concept of the watchdog to non-professionals, a concept which has often been (dis-cursively) restricted to the professional identity in many other frameworks. Obviously, this is not without danger, as it might strengthen a surveillance society, but if embedded within a democratic framework and investigative journalism, this re-articulation remains important. More generally, positioning media organizations and professionals as part of "the" people counters the traditional (mainstream) media hubris, whereas these mainstream media see themselves as central to society (Couldry 2003). Secondly, especially when narodnost is combined with massovost, the large-scale nature of participation is highlighted. Here popular access to the mainstream media becomes less incidental and secondary (as is often the case in contemporary mainstream media) and it is transformed into a core prin-ciple of these media organizations. Thirdly, narodnost also provides different and impor-tant (from a participatory perspective) articulations of the audience, as the audience is first of all seen as embedded within everyday life. Even more importantly, we see the audience (through the system) articulated as organized. This rather rare perspective on the audience – which can, for instance, be also found in Matta's (1986) work – stresses that audience members are not either isolated individuals (an articulation that is found in the mainstream media model) or organized within the media organization itself (as articulated in the alter-native media model), but that they are part of civil society and enter into the media worlds as rhizomatically connected individuals.

4. Conclusion

This article has listed quite a substantial number of concepts that have been attributed a prefix, and many more (like for instance post-feminism and trans-gender) were omitted. Whether we like it or not, prefixes have entered our academic language, and should be dealt with accordingly. One way of doing this is being aware of the politics of the pre-fix, which does indeed show (or hide) strong conceptual, normative and/or ontological claims, situated within both the intellectual/academic debates and the (related) models used to describe our present-day (and past and future) societies.

At the same time, the temporariness and contextuality of prefixing should be emphasi-zed. Conceptual re-articulations are important because they counter conceptual (and general) conservatism and essentialism, and can capture societal change. But at the same time we should not forget that prefixes represent somewhat naive attempts to stop the sliding of the signifier. Moreover, they are artificial and limited in their long-term applicability: for instance, prefixing prefixed concepts is not an elegant conceptual solution. Eventually, the struggle to signify should (especially when describing social realities) result in the re-signification of the "original" concept or the development of new

concepts. From this perspective, prefixing can be seen as part of these processes, but its role should not be overestimated.

In the case of post-socialism, the debate is complicated by the two clusters of meanings attributed to the signifier. If we look at post-socialism as a temporal-spatial concept, one can only wonder whether the signifier has not lost its conceptual strength, and whether it is not too reductionist to keep addressing Central and Eastern Europe as a post-socialist and transitional region. Without disregarding the importance of the socialist past for this part of Europe, I would like to argue that – twenty years after the fall of the Wall – the time has come to give up on the prefixed concept of post-socialism in its first meaning. But if we look at post-socialism as a critical-intellectual concept related to, but still distinct from, post-colonialism, I would like to take an inverse position. From this perspective, I can agree with Stenning and Hörschelmann's (2008: 312) point that "the calls for the end of post-socialism" are "premature and misplaced". As a critical-intellectual project, post-socialism remains very necessary, focussing on the dialectics of past and present and avoiding the idea of a clean and radical rupture that is based on the phantasm of the *tabula rasa*. However important it is to also symbolically/discursively break with the past, we should also be careful not let the "post" prefix block our access to the past. To avoid this phantasmagoric trap, post-socialism is important to make us permanently and critically aware of the past. Post-socialist theories can also point us to the coping strategies of denial, amnesia and nostalgia, which in many cases offer reductionist and essentialized representations of past, present and future.

This brings me to my salvage operation, based on the reading into the past strategy. We should not only scrutinize how the undercurrents of a problematic past have managed to consolidate themselves, or have made the pendulum swing to the opposite (and evenly problematic) position. But we should also re-enter – firmly anchored in a democratic present – the past, and investigate what can be of value for that present. If we can critique how the past works in the present, we should simultaneously allow ourselves to take a more generous attitude in order to learn from the past. This move requires steel nerves and chirurgical skills, as all concepts, even the ones that are the most promising from a participatory-democratic perspective, have been articulated in a totalitarian discursive framework. But still, through the combined logics of disarticulation and re-articulation, we can detach valuable concepts from the past and insert them into the present.

This article argues that narodnost is one of these treasures from the past, which might play a valuable role in the media and participation debate. A first line of argumentation was based on the analysis of how Marxism and anarchism have strongly impacted on the debates on participatory communication. In a second move, a more radical (some might say blasphemous) revisiting operation was conducted, by going into the Soviet theory of the press, in order to see how one of its key building blocks – narodnost – offers a way to enrich present-day debates on media and participation. The narodnost concept firstly offers a rather unique connection between non-professionalism and the media's watchdog role, which has rarely been established. The narodnost concept also provides us with a middle road between the minimalist mainstream media participation and the maximalist alternative media participation approaches. Through its emphasis on an audience which organizes itself outside the media organizations, in order to structure and enable its participation within these media organizations, a whole new perspective on media participation in democratic societies becomes possible. Apart from this promise of enriching

the media and participation debate, the analysis of the narodnost concept also illustrates the more general point of this paper, namely that it is time to use intellectual-critical post-socialist strategies to (re)read into the past whilst still vigilantly protecting the democratic nature of the present.

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