

Postsocialism

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Abstract

Postsocialism is not just the study of the period after the end of Communism. Like postcolonialism, it is an analytic, a way of looking at societies in both East and West that were shaped by state socialism and the Cold War. Focusing on capitalism's alter ego, postsocialism looks at how production, consumption, identity and sovereignty were shaped by the experience of one party rule and central planning, and it reflects critically on the enduring effects of socialist ideas about the role of state and market in social life. While the countries that were once grouped by their affiliation with Communism are now diverging, future research focuses on the reorganization of the "Second World" into donors and receivers within a new international order based on humanitarianism and development, on the role of bureaucratic governance in integrating former socialist countries into the EU, and on the crucial standpoint that socialist ideologies continue to provide outside neoliberal capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

Postsocialism, some might say, is a concept with a half-life. If it only refers to the countries released in 1989/1991 from the hegemony of the Soviet system, it has increasingly less analytic purchase. The trajectories of postsocialist countries are so diverse that the socialist past has ceased to have significant patterned effects. Although the consequences of the socialist period are not completely ended, they are becoming ever less explanatory of policies decided upon and practices engaged in, in those countries as a set. This is especially true as Russia redefines its sphere of interest and as countries in the former Soviet sphere reorient themselves toward it, or not. Therefore, whereas many common features once united the countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, for instance, by the early twenty-first century this had become much less true (and even less so of socialist countries outside Europe and Eurasia, such as Cuba or China). If postsocialism is no more than a chronological designation referring to what comes after socialism, then we can only usher it toward the exit. After all, no one now refers to western Europe as "post-feudal."

But what if we instead conceptualize postsocialism not just as a chronological concept, but also as an analytic notion, on the analogy with “postcolonialism” as a critical standpoint (see Chari & Verdery, 2009). Postcolonialism is not mainly about what happened after colonialism but constitutes a critical reflection both on colonialism’s ongoing presence in post-independence projects (involving national identity, sovereignty, accumulation strategies, democracy, etc.) and on the possibility of knowledge itself. Postsocialism, too, could be a critical standpoint from which to reflect on the socialist past and possible socialist futures, on the ongoing intrusion of neoliberal programs concerning markets, property, democracy, and so on into former socialist spaces, and on the social and spatial effects of Cold War institutions upon the possibilities for knowledge. Although the chronological sense necessarily lurks at the edges of the concept (especially in expressions such as “postsocialist societies”), we use it rather in this analytical sense.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

As an analytic concept, postsocialism rests on a broad base that includes anthropological research on socialism and on the transformation of socialist societies beginning in the 1990s (see review articles by Buyandelgerin, 2008; Rogers & Verdery, 2013). It also includes other work on changes in the global capitalist economy as well as post-colonial texts that might provide models for the direction we propose (e.g., Harvey, 1989; Trouillot, 1991). Starting with Verdery’s work (e.g., 1996, Chapter 1), the anthropology of socialism clarified how the social organization of socialist societies was distinctive from other kinds of social orders, despite some superficial similarities to them (such as the commodification of labor [see Lampland, 1995] or citizens’ interest in consumption [see Fehérváry, 2009]). An ever-expanding literature on post-1989 transformation chronicled the effects of dismantling the characteristic features of socialism, and incorporating the formerly socialist states into capitalist markets. Many of these works saw their task as responding to the over-simplifications and distortions inherent in a literature dominated by political science and economics, which usually presumed western-capitalist and liberal-democratic forms as normal or even natural (see, e.g., Dunn, 2005).

Among the themes treated in postsocialist anthropology are “civil-society” building and the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (e.g., Hemment, 2007); changing notions of citizenship (Petryna, 2002; Phillips, 2008); privatization and property restitution (Dunn, 2004; Verdery, 2003); market formation (Collier, 2011; Rogers, 2005); environmental politics (Gille, 2007); changing welfare policies (Caldwell, 2004); “corruption” and “mafia” (Humphrey, 2002). Much of the anthropological work on socialism

and postsocialism began by asking how the distinctive structure of the socialist economy of shortage shaped everyday practice. How socialism shaped time and space (Schwenkel, 2013; Verdery, 1996, Chapter 2) and how both time and space were reworked during the “transition” period of the 1990s and early 2000s were central questions. Another important issue was how people’s identities—including gender and sexual identities, national and religious identities, and class status (see, e.g., Gal & Kligman, 2000; Hann, 2006)—were formed under state socialism and reworked during the subsequent massive upheaval in social structure. Changing consumption habits, framed by both changes in political economy and new social identities, became important loci for seeing changes in the region (e.g., Ries, 2009; Shevchenko, 2009), as did new forms of religious practice (Rogers, 2009). Along with this, understanding how people dealt with the negative effects of social change, including hunger and poverty and the decay of social networks, became key topics.

CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH

What was state socialism, what forms of sovereignty did it invoke, and how did it shape identity and daily practice? Questions about how people consumed in economies of shortage, how labor was structured and valued, how property was organized, and even what made people laugh are all still under investigation. The early postsocialist period also still poses significant intellectual and historical problems. Specifically concerning postsocialism’s critique of western forms, we mention our own work on privatization in Polish industry and Romanian agriculture, which revealed the difficulties of importing “private property” ideas wholesale into postsocialist contexts and exposed the weaknesses of these ideas as models for human sociality. Similar conclusions emerge from other research such as Greenberg’s (2011) on democratization in Serbia, or Rivkin-Fish’s work (2005) on medical “technology transfer” in Russia (see also Rogers & Verdery, 2013). All this work serves to clarify the forms of imperialism underlying the “transition from socialism,” while, at the same time, illustrating how contingent, partial and complex the transfer of Western ideas and forms has been.

An increasingly significant field of inquiry concerns two emerging modes of power in postsocialism: bureaucracy, on the one hand, and state violence on the other. Bureaucratic practice was revealed to be a particularly important form of power during the process of EU accession, especially once the unanticipated consequences of the currency union began to emerge more clearly in 2012. Although discussion of whether the EU is yet another imperial form has become commonplace (Böröcz & Kovács, 2001), useful work continues on the effects of the hardening of borders between EU

members and their neighbors (Allina-Pisano, 2009). Research in progress by Holmes (2014) on the policies of the European Central Bank and the euro crisis will prove essential in understanding the effects of the intersection between global finance and people's life conditions in the various parts of Europe. Additional innovative research focuses on the globalization of "standards" that has accompanied EU membership as EU requirements for handling food, for instance—standards developed for the industrialized agricultural practices of western Europe—are imposed on the postsocialist East, where such practices are more rarely found (e.g., Dunn, 2005; Gille 2011).

Ethnographic research has shown that state violence is an equally significant mode of power in the postsocialist world. Work on the secret police (Verdery, 2014) and the long-term effects of war (Tishkov, 2004) have shed light on a form of state power that relies on intermittent and unpredictable violence. Understanding this form of sovereignty has become particularly significant given rising authoritarianism in Russia under Putin, as well as new forms of authoritarianism in Hungary, Romania and Georgia, all of which claim to be democratic states. How and why these new forms of domination are correlated with EU accession is a question that remains to be researched.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As an analytic optic, postsocialism reveals profound transformations in the nature of global sovereignty and new forms of organization in the international system. For example, beginning with the crisis in Bosnia and continuing on with Kosovo and various countries of the Caucasus, the postsocialist world became the target of so-called humanitarian intervention. Under the banner of "the responsibility to protect," Western countries have increasingly overridden the sovereignty of other states and legitimated interference in the affairs of countries in the postsocialist world. Using NGOs and intragovernmental agencies such as the United Nations agencies, the United States and Western Europe have taken over the functions of government in the former Yugoslavia and the South Caucasus. Like the effects of other Western "capacity building" projects in which Western forms are supposed to be imported wholesale, humanitarian projects have effects their proponents cannot predict (Dunn, 2012), but the long-term effects of dividing the world into "humanitarians" and "victims" have yet to be seen.

One effect of the humanitarian imperative has been to reorganize the countries of the former Eastern Bloc within the framework of international development. Countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia are actively seeking

to build development agencies, to learn the practices of international development, and in so doing, to secure their places in an international hierarchy that divides the world into donors and recipients. Far from being straightforwardly altruistic, the language of development and humanitarianism has allowed for the United States to engage in the “humanitarian bombing” of Serbia during the conflict with Kosovo, for Russia to give passports to residents of South Ossetia and then to defend the resulting “Russian citizens” during the war with Georgia, and for Poland and the Czech Republic to request NATO intervention in the Russo-Georgian War. Using postsocialism as an optic reveals how some countries on both sides of the Cold War international divide are deemed incapable of self-governance and cast as passive geopolitical actors, while others are vying to realign global politics, claim new geographical spheres of influence, and extend their political reach using new forms of international military, economic, and charitable action.

A postsocialist analytic also directs attention to key debates over the role of the state in domestic economies and politics. While research on nostalgia for the socialist past is now declining, there are new opportunities to study debates in postsocialist countries over state-led redistribution, social safety nets, and the value of labor. The crisis of the Eurozone has made these debates particularly incisive, as some of the postsocialist entrants into the EU and the Euro currency union ask what the effects of joining were, and whether it was more prudent to stay out of international organizations once seen as the prize for democratization and marketization. These debates have led to the re-emergence both of an extreme right (e.g., in Hungary) and of new post-communist leftist movements (e.g., in Poland). We need research on why Left and Right have become more polarized in the wake of the Cold War, and why the language of the Cold War about socialism has become even more significant in both “East” and “West” after state socialism has disappeared.

Finally, the emerging temporal horizons of postsocialism—both in the former Eastern Bloc and in the West—invite exploration. Postsocialism is characterized by a future orientation different from the Western industrial notion of never-ending progress and the Marxist-Leninist vision of socialist utopia. In East and West, citizens are now bearing risks once borne by the state, to build futures without resources such as education and healthcare once provided by governments, and to strategize in markets and polities that are less regulated, or differently regulated, than before. Postsocialist citizens, however, bring to these experiences distinctive repertoires of skills and expectations—approaching the new temporal horizons of the household mortgage, for instance, from within specific forms of social embeddedness and affective engagement. As new financial instruments and new forms of indebtedness expand both the risks and the scale of economic

activity, as new religious ideologies (such as Salafism, for example) link the postsocialist countries to other global movements, and as new forms of domination engender new forms of adaptation and resistance, the study of postsocialism promises to cast light not only on a world region but on global processes.

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