

REASSESSING PERIPHERIES IN POST-COMMUNIST STUDIES

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As we approach the new millennium and reflect on the ten years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we can begin to assess not only the social, political, and economic changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe, Mongolia, and the former Soviet Union, but also on how our approach to the field of post-Communist cultural studies has changed. The 8th annual SOYUZ conference on cultural studies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union was held at Indiana University-Bloomington on April 9th and 10th. Our sponsors included Indiana University's Anthropology and Folklore departments, the Russian and East European Institute, the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center, the Center for Global Change and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs of Indiana University.

The organizing committee chose "Peripheral Visions: Views from the Margins" as a theme that encompassed both research on topics that were rarely, if ever, looked at under the Communist regime (e.g. gender discrimination, corruption, poverty, alcoholism) and reflexive studies on how research itself has changed, becoming multi-disciplinary and collaborative. The response we received was as diverse and engaging as we had hoped. Participants came from as close as the Economics Department at Indiana University and from as far away as Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Although participants represented a wide range of disciplines and experience, they shared an emphasis on empirical understandings of how people in the former Communist bloc are redefining their place in the world at local, regional, international, and transnational levels.

Collectively, many of the papers from the conference show how people who have been defined as part of peripheries are actively engaged in global and transnational processes. While some groups depend on international aid to improve education or social services, others make use of kin networks abroad to improve their position in the economy. Several other papers emphasize that groups intentionally position themselves as peripheral for economic, religious, and other reasons. However, a common theme to all of the case studies is how the legacy of communism or socialism affected local attempts to redefine their position in relation to the traditional cores in both East and West. For some, geography is a great advantage in renegotiating their position at national and international levels (Ukrainian borderlands, Old Believers in Siberia). Others are significantly impeded, especially in the economic realm, by the institutional structures created during the Soviet period.

Property institutions are a primary legacy of the Soviet system. Salukavadze's paper focuses on Georgian efforts to create an effective system of land management through institutional and legislative reform, as well as the implementation of a multi-purpose land information system, or cadastral system. Though Salukavadze is optimistic, based on several years of successful reforms, other natural resource-based institutional reforms have not been as successful. Bayulgen concludes that the pre-existing institutional forms have negatively impacted the ability of Azerbaijan to extract, export, and regulate oil. Likewise, Spechler is pessimistic about the prospects for regional integration in Central Asia. While individuals are in favor of integration, and cultural similarities make it seem like a feasible alternative to continued economic integration with Moscow, the Soviet

legacy has left a poor regional infrastructure, weak individual economies, and leaders whose economic mentality continues to be shaped by Soviet economic policies.

Highly critical of her own government, Djuric-Kuzmanovic focuses on how shifts in Serbian government policy since 1990 have led to dramatic increases in poverty and social stratification. In the end, she argues that the government itself is not a place to look for change; rather, the Serbian people must initiate change with the assistance of Western support. Since our conference occurred during the NATO air strikes against the Serbian government and Djuric-Kuzmanovic could not fly out of Novi Sad, her pessimistic vision of a country in ruins is all too real.

Development, land reform, natural resource management, and regional integration are all highly formal institutions. Several of the authors have found informal economic and social structures located at the peripheries of formal institutions. Koehler refers to “the school of the street” as a *space de passage* that is neither kin nor state based, but is a training ground for young boys, many of whom apply these lessons to careers in organized crime. Shostak examines how villagers in Hrystavolia, in Western Ukraine, have reestablished ties with overseas kin, more or less replacing Kiev as a cultural and economic core. Among the Dolgan and Nganasan of Siberia, John Ziker has found a return to a subsistence, or “survival economy,” in which these herders reduce risky economic behavior by limiting their involvement in the emerging market economy.

A number of participants focused more explicitly on how various groups in the periphery establish and maintain their identities in relation to or apart from the core. Wilson looks at the animal rights movement in Poland, which is predominantly a youth movement of recent origin. A declining economy has led to worsened conditions for animals in Poland and subsequently, youth, who wish to infuse Western cultural values into their lives, have taken up this environmental movement, which runs counter to the post-socialist nationalist trend. Quite the opposite, among the Evenki, Govorina finds that the maintenance of a national identity is the result of modified uses of Soviet-era institutional structures designed to eradicate indigenous Siberian cultures. In quite another way, the Old Believers of south central Siberia, have maintained their identity for centuries by placing themselves as far from Moscow as possible. In an account that blends academic research with ethnographic travelogue, Fridman provides a glimpse into the private world of a group of Old Believers in Tuva, while hinting, through the words of her informants, at a growing dissatisfaction with this lifestyle. Professor Baatar reviews how three different groups of Mongolic descent have maintained their ethnic identities upon arrival in the United States, including the effects of ongoing relations with relatives in Mongolia and the Soviet Union on the everyday practice of ethnicity.

Another group of papers deal with the lives and roles of women in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Mambetalieva describes women’s role in art, not only as a creative and independent process, but also as a process of cultural reproduction, which is very important in developing national character for the newly independent Kyrgyzstan. Stakeyeva traces the changes in women’s health care since the break-up of the Soviet Union. While medical facilities are available throughout towns and cities in Kyrgyzstan, many women lack necessary transportation and money, but several NGOs are engaged in improving access in rural areas while educating rural women about the need for medical services. In a review of the weekly newspaper *Zavtra*, Suspitsina demonstrates how nationalist propagandists use feminine imagery in political arenas to advance their own

agendas. In doing so, this newspaper uses women as a symbolic representation of Russia itself, referring to Mother Russia, which needs “protection” from those seek to “rape” or “destroy” her.

Finally, several papers focus on changes in the academic sphere. Both Alieva and Djanaeva examine changes in the educational system in Kyrgyzstan. Both argue that changes in the educational system are essential to building democracy in Central Asia and suggest that these changes should blend the best of what already exists in Kyrgyzstan with specific lessons from the United States and Europe. On the one hand, Alieva calls for a humanistic philosophy of cultural education with its emphasis on ethics and civil society. On the other hand, Djanaeva concludes that knowledge sharing between cultures, through the internationalization of higher education, is the key to developing democratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan. Aligica critiques the way in which scholars have tended to frame the social, economic, and political reality of the democratic transition in Eastern Europe. As an alternative, he presents an approach that integrates formal modeling with the qualitative methods more commonly used by anthropologists. Aligica challenges us to produce better theories through more collaborative, multi-disciplinary research at multiple levels of analysis.