

DISCUSSANT REMARKS: MOBILITY, LABOR, AND TIES THAT BIND

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In her paper for the 2002 Soyuz Symposium (not included in this issue), Madelaine Hron wrote that the mythic charter for belonging in the Czech Republic is collective suffering, and those who left as heroes to fight against communism abroad -- are now seen by new Czech citizens as "plundering opportunists" who really left in search of material comforts. According to this new national narrative, the Czech masses silently endured the weight of the socialist regime, while the individualist émigrés steeped themselves in Western commerce. As a result, the returnees have no legal or material claims to Czech citizenship.

This situation elucidates how post-socialist states reformulate the dichotomy between socialism and capitalism as they reorient themselves after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery suggest (1999:2), "local improvisations... may either press either in novel directions or toward a 'return' to socialism." Indeed, the panelists have shown that both processes are at work at the same time: moving in new directions involves a repackaging of socialist morals to respond to the seemingly individualist marketplace. Citizens of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have to negotiate their way through this jumble of communal values and personal needs, and this panel shows us that one key way to do this is through migration, what Ishkanian calls "a transnational survival strategy" (13). The papers in this panel discussed the reasons for emigration and the implications these decisions have for the migrants themselves and the countries and families they left behind either temporarily or permanently.

What I found most intriguing about these presentations is that they elucidate how prostitution has become a central metaphor for the choices people make and the pressures they face in moving across borders in search of better

lives. It plays an important role in Milan Kundera's *La Ignorancia*, a novel that clarifies, as well as undermines, the new myth of Czech nationhood. The idea of prostitution directly impacts where and how Armenian women will work abroad, and it influences the perception that Western Europeans have of migrants from Bulgaria and Eastern Europe. Why is prostitution (and noticeably *female* prostitution) such a salient symbol of the post-socialist world order? And, what does it tell us about the dangers and possibilities of migration from East to West?

Let me first start with a story from my own fieldwork. I was first struck by the prevalence of post-Soviet prostitution talk during my research in Moscow in 1995 and 1996 at a central Synagogue in Moscow. At that time, the elderly Russian Jewish congregation was headed by a Western Rabbi from France. The Russian Jews there adhered to Soviet values of communalism -- emphasizing a lack of money as an abundance of soul, which in this case was their ability to be believers during the Soviet regime, an act that did not require outward signs of religiosity. The new rabbi wanted to revitalize the community to appeal to the Russian Jewish youth, and he decided that the best way to do this was to update the look of the prayer hall, to make it more modern. Gathering the synagogue *dvadtsatka* (board) together, each Russian Jewish member got a chance to vote for or against the stripping down of the old prayer hall and the removal of the solid wooden pews that were to be replaced with new, lighter ones. While at first giving their word to each other that they would vote against this renovation, the majority of the congregation finally decided to go along with the rabbi's plans. One middle aged Russian Jewish employee of the synagogue accused the old men of selling their votes to the *Western* rabbi. The men responded to him by saying "What you said about prostitution was not

correct.” Standing nearby, I wondered to myself, “What has prostitution got to do with this?”

There was talk at that time in Moscow about female prostitutes who, perhaps out of habit during the days of communism, hung around the hotels looking for foreign businessmen. One man at the synagogue discussed the phenomenon of the *zaderzhanka*, the kept woman, who had become, according to him, “all dried up, shriveled up” due to her selling herself for money. In discussing prostitutes, people were making moral evaluations about the dangers of capitalism. The scenario goes like this: the market makes you think of yourself first, and you will be so tempted by it that you will sell yourself completely -- either your body in the case of real prostitutes or your word in the case of the synagogue members. At the end of this transaction, you will be left lifeless -- physically and/or morally. This notion reminds me of what Georg Simmel declares as “the degradation of the woman by prostitution” (1978:379). He writes that a prostitute’s humiliation derives from the fact that “a woman gives herself up more completely and unreservedly by surrendering this one part of herself than does the more differentiated man under the same circumstances” (378). He bases this analysis on his assertion that a woman has more to lose in having sex for money than a man, since her emotions, thoughts, and actions are more closely tied together. She sees the sexual relationship as more personal than he does, and thus when she takes money for it, her personal value is abased. While not debating the problems with this assumption about female nature, it seems that there is a tendency for people in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to see women in a similar way. Prostitution talk in the context of migration highlights how these communities assume that a woman’s being involved with the capitalist West poses physical and ideological dangers for her, since the individualism of the market seems to threaten the hegemony of the family and national identity at large.

Armine Ishkanian writes a wonderful ethnographic piece about how the new pattern of *khopan* (working abroad) upsets the traditional family structures and division of labor, since women are leaving their families to find jobs. Armenian women in America decide which jobs to take based on if they are “honest” or “clean” and if profits can go back home to their families. As Ishkanian shows, these jobs are like those they had at home -- “nurturing/caring for the

elderly, sick, and children” (10). Ishkanian concludes that Armenian women engage in such jobs to protect their image of the moral mother.

What I find most fascinating here is that in their narratives about how they feel doing the work they do, they make a contrast between themselves and prostitutes. One Armenian woman says, “I am doing decent, clean work, not selling myself like the women who go into prostitution in the Emirates.” Another claims, “At least I have kept my honor. But they have lost everything. They are limits to what I would do for money and that [prostitution] is one of the things I would never do.” Ishkanian concludes that “these narratives about the ‘other’ point to the darker side of migration and the dangers of working abroad” (11), and she discusses increased trafficking of Armenian women and children in the Middle East.

I would push Ishkanian to probe deeper into these comparisons. By casually referring to honor and shame, she conjures up the honor/shame complex without problematizing it. Traditional studies of the Arab world and the Mediterranean have focused on how the honor/shame system guides behavior among the sexes within the context of kinship. This perspective privileges gender within the household (Peristiany 1966). More recent studies look at how sexual relationships outside of marriage create different kinds of gender (Lozios and Papataxiarchis 1991). With that in mind, I want to know why female Armenian migrant workers refer to their honor and shame within the kinship system. Is this because the market is a male domain that threatens the traditional female roles, and they feel the need to protect the ideal of the family in the face of what many call the “white genocide” of Armenians? How does an assertion of motherhood against prostitution work to preserve the homeland abroad? Is it because prostitution represents the selling of a woman’s whole self for money, an act of independence, that would mean that she would not have anything left to give her family? These migrants are reaching to the past to make the present. As Ishkanian notes, “people do not abandon their worldviews... when they migrate, rather these become the anchors that tie them to a particular place, society, community, history, and culture.” Why then, is the mother/whore complex that key anchor?

Kristen Ghodsee provides an excellent overview of the competing discourses surrounding the issues of migration from Bulgaria to the EU. She delineates how Bulgaria,

along with other unstable Balkan nations, has become a “source country” for Western Europe (2). Such a metaphor brings to the surface the powerful role that images of the body have for state building. In moving beyond importance of exclusive blood ties for membership in a particular nation, the European Union relies on blood from without to strengthen its new Frankenstein-like body against American competitors, as the EU government narratives suggest. The EU is thus drawing on modern medicine (as opposed to folk wisdom) for its salvation. I would like to see Ghodsee investigate in more detail the images of the body in discourses about emigration, especially in West’s relationship with the East. As she discusses, Western Europe’s popular media portrays Bulgarians as helpless, immoral, and weak. What is the significance of “brain drain” in the Bulgarian point of view versus the bodies of “sex slaves,” the physically molested women and children forced into prostitution? Physical and moral depravity has been a constant theme in the way West has viewed the East, whether it be via Said’s Orientalism or the way in which German Jews treated the newly arrived Polish Jews as dirty and diseased. Is an emphasis on the mind by the East a way to counter act this Western focus on the body? A history of these processes of identification would add a layer of richness to Ghodsee’s work.

I was quite intrigued by the possibilities of what Ghodsee calls her “roadmap forward” (8). It is not clear where she will go from here, but she does say that these discourses “trickle down to the everyday lived experiences of both Eastern and Western Europeans.” If she has not already, I suggest she take up George Marcus’ suggestion for multi-sited ethnography (1995) that provides a window onto large processes like emigration. The techniques of “following the people” as they crisscross between East and West or “following the body metaphor” of emigration/immigration might provide additional new insights. And, as Hron, Ishkanian, and Ghodsee show, post-socialists make sense of these opposing values by talking and thinking about the prostitute.

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