

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE: ETHNOGRAPHIES OF POSTSOCIALISM

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The essays gathered here are selections from papers presented at the 2003 Soyuz symposium, hosted by the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and held at Amherst College on February 7-8. This year we abandoned attempts to impose a theme, and invited scholars instead to contribute papers on the general topic of ethnographies of Postsocialism. The symposium featured presentations by scholars based in the US, Germany, the UK and Hungary, drawing on research conducted across a range of locations from the Former Soviet Union to Cuba. The conference was sponsored by the Dean of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the Five College Lecture Fund, University of Massachusetts Department of Anthropology, Amherst College Russian Department, Amherst College Political Science Department, Smith College History Department, Smith College Anthropology Department and Mt. Holyoke College Russian & Eurasian Studies Program.

This conference marked ten years of Soyuz, the postsocialist cultural studies group, or at least that's what I claimed. As I was pulling things together, there was some debate as to when Soyuz actually started. As Nancy Ries, one of the original participants notes in her keynote piece, Soyuz began as a series of informal conversations about socialism and Postsocialism in the early 1990s. As organizer of this year's symposium, I spent some time thinking about how best to mark this approximate anniversary. How too to respond to the challenges inherent in it, the challenge raised by a number of scholars and laid out most clearly by Katherine Verdery in her 2002 Soyuz keynote address: fourteen years after the Berlin Wall came down and state socialism began to unravel, "whither Postsocialism"?ⁱ Has it outlived its usefulness as an organizing rubric? In the context of the uncertain regroupings and realignments that Steven Sampson has called the

"post-Postsocialist" phase (Sampson 2002), what do we have in common, and what can be gained from bringing ourselves into dialogue?

To my mind, these papers demonstrate the value of continuing the conversation, a conversation that is not exclusive to those working in the region. The papers gathered here deal with themes that occur in anthropological discussions of any part of the world: agency in the face of the processes of globalization, cultural explanations for new economic stratifications, memory, history and identity, yet they are distinctively inflected by the socialist past and narratives of the past. The Postsocialism that emerges from reading this set of papers is not a unified thing, but a set of processes with considerable regional and local inflections. Building on the best insights from the anthropological studies that preceded them, and which have contributed so much to the study of postsocialist change, these papers do not reify the during and after of socialism, but are instead attentive to continuities, flows and flux. This anthropology of Postsocialism is attentive both to history and to the "broader political geography" (Gal and Kligman 2000:4) within which field sites are located: the shifting discursive and geopolitical parameters of Europe (before and after the end of the Cold War), the diverse set of forces and flows we call globalization and the reconfigurations of what some call Empire. In sum, they make a strong case for anthropology's role in the study of formerly socialist states and offer an occasion to consider what the postsocialist case offers anthropology more broadly.

Many of the papers addressed questions of transforming power relations, economic stratification, and the moral sense making that accompanies this. David Altshuler and Tatjana Thelen examine the dilemmas of privatization and moral justice. Altshuler turns to history to help make sense of debates about privatization in

the Czech Republic, examining narratives about property ownership and wealth during four key periods since the end of the Second World War. His account reveals an interesting persistence that illuminates much about the political imagination in this locale. The diverse critiques of socio economic difference he examines – ranging from dissident accounts during the 1970s and 1980s, to contemporary property disputes amongst neighbors and discussions of corruption - are all conducted in terms of Czechness versus foreignness; they articulate disputes not only about class and morality, but ethnic and national difference too. Tatjana Thelen examines privatization from a different angle, looking at the reconstruction of rural society following decollectivization in Hungary. Focusing on gender and generation, she examines the ways that interpersonal relations are shaping the privatization of land at the same time as they are themselves transformed by this process. In her account, the “new power of old men” is testimony not to a straightforward reinstatement of patriarchal power, but also reflects the partial persistence of socialist gender arrangements.

In their different ways, Diana Blank and Irina Pshenichnikova both examine the topic of transforming postsocialist power relations by looking at language. Blank’s topography of fairytale cynicism in the Ukraine focuses on the rhetorical devices that allow people to deal with social dislocation. The narratives she presents us with are at once sense making strategies and incisive commentaries on the postsocialist distribution of power. Pshenichnikova’s study investigates the uneven process of professional socialization into international business norms and culture by focusing on language socialization. Her case study of undergraduates in the St. Petersburg School of Management reveals interesting moments of contestation and slippage as students struggle to learn market economy values in the language of the global economy – English.

A couple of the papers examine the theme of transforming postsocialist power relations through the lens of postcolonial studies. Douglas Rogers looks at a case of religious revival in the Russian Urals. Drawing a comparison with studies of religious transformation in postcolonial contexts, he argues that the postsocialist world offers something distinct. In this case, a religious transformation intertwined through political

economic change that is not routed through subjectivity or personhood. Despite their ability to marshal diverse local and global resources, the Belokrinitsy (priestly Old Believers) are only able to achieve a partial conversion amongst the local population, many of who still prefer to seek the services of old women to arrange funerals. David Koester’s paper examines contemporary drinking practices in post-Soviet Kamchatka in terms of their colonial effects. He shows how beyond their ostensible role of enhancing social cohesion, drinking practices are instances where distinctions between ethnic Russians and indigenous others are enacted and maintained – within drinking groups, not just at its boundaries.

Nikolai Voukov and Robert Krikorian examine the intersecting themes of power, memory and identity by looking at the use of history in the present. Krikorian examines appropriations of the past in the context of the Azerbaijani/Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. He traces the ways that history was claimed and used to mobilize and legitimize Armenian struggles for national determination during the late Soviet period, steadily eroding Soviet legitimacy. Voukov’s paper looks at these themes through examining the fate of state socialist monuments in Bulgaria. In his account, acts of desecration, removal or reinstallation of monuments are forms of contestation about the meaning of death and the sacred, which were crucially entwined in state socialist symbolism.

A striking number of papers this year looked at the architecture of transnational engagement in postsocialist states, that is, the local reception of international aid and policy interventions and the discourses accompanying them. Contributors brought critical insights to the topic, drawing attention to the unintentionally homogenizing and exclusionary effects of NGOs and “empowering” discourses of civil society, feminism and human rights. At the same time these authors critique international interventions, they are clearly invested in contributing to their improvement. Kristen Ghodsee’s paper makes the case for ethnography by discussing the problematic exportation of development models to postsocialist states, specifically the promotion of microcredit schemes in Bulgaria. As she shows, the failure of these initiatives is testimony to the failure to pay attention to local, state socialist inflected constructions and meanings. Leyla Keough and Ethan Wilensky-Lanford use ethnographic

knowledge to problematize internationally circulating discourses of women's rights, highlighting the agency and power of women typically represented as victims. Keough's paper focuses on Gagauz women who migrate from Moldova to work as domestics in Istanbul. Her rich ethnographic account complicates policy discussions and discourses on trafficking by exploring the diverse motivations and structural factors that propel these mobile domestics. She argues convincingly that these women are better seen as "agents in traffic" than as hapless victims. Wilensky-Lansford's account of bride capture in Kyrgyzstan similarly challenges expectations. He explores local ambivalence about this practice that is deplored by US and European human rights groups and suggests that the practice itself is more flexible than outsiders allow.

Helms, Wallace, Wallace-Lorencova and Erikson discuss NGOs, whose role and presence has been so important in internationally sponsored projects of social renewal in postsocialist states over the last decade. In her analysis of the Bosnian feminist NGO Medica Zenica, Elissa Helms shows the bureaucratization associated with NGOs undermines local strategies and alliances that have been painstakingly devised and works against the ethnic reconciliation NGOs set out to achieve. This same theme peeps through in Dickie Wallace's account of journalistic practice in the contested Croatian borderland of Kraijna. Here, those who offer counter projects to the exclusionary ethnonationalist model of local radio ironically fall between the cracks and are not heard or recognized by agencies which only recognize the need for "minority media" projects. Viera Wallace-Lorencova's study of queer activism in Slovakia deals with the intersection of NGOs and the processes of EU integration. She examines the scope for agency of Slovakian lesbian and gay activists as they stand at the complex juncture of EU integration and globalization. Her paper demonstrates that despite considerable hurdles, queer activists have been able to use international discourses of human rights to political effect in Slovakia. Nested within these latter papers are rich ethical and methodological questions. In NGO-based research, the usual dilemmas of participant observation are intensified and especially transparent. Researchers are intimately bound within the political economic relations that make NGO work possible. They are often funded by

the same agencies; they may work as volunteers, evaluators or consultants at the same time as they conduct research in NGOs and find themselves juggling to meet multiple objectives and agendas. Jennifer Erikson's paper, based on research with the Bosnian women's group Medica Infoteka, specifically focuses on the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting research within NGOs as she describes her attempt to forge a collaborative project that made little sense to her Bosnian feminist co-workers.

Finally, a report. This year for the first time, Soyuz participants began a productive and stimulating dialogue that I for one would like to see continue within the pages of AEER. Under the theme of "teaching Postsocialism", a group of us came together in a working lunch to explore some of the particular professional and pedagogical challenges we face. The idea emerged from informal conversations with colleagues during the planning stages of the conference (thanks, Michele Rivkin-Fish and Marko Zivkovic). Some of us were recently hired as postsocialist scholars; we find ourselves regarded as specialists not merely of Russia, or the Balkans, but of "Postsocialism" and "postsocialist studies". What does this mean to us, what does it entail? What are the particular challenges we have faced in our teaching? As the years go by, we find ourselves teaching students who are not rooted in the area studies paradigm and for whom the Cold War is increasingly distant. Depending on our institutions, we may find ourselves teaching students who have little or no backgrounds in the history of the region. How to handle this? With which of our colleagues do we find ourselves in most productive dialogue? Participants discussed readings that worked, films, as well as the particular pedagogical challenges of teaching Postsocialism. We concluded the session by drawing up a list of suggestions that we hope to pick up on: the creation of a syllabus archive on the Soyuz website, the publication of a special edition of AEER on Teaching Postsocialism, an edited volume or teaching text that includes theory, ethnography and fiction.

My thanks to Michele Rivkin-Fish, Soyuz convener, who worked with me on the selection of papers and organization of panels and to Nancy Ries, who has worked with me in editing this volume. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the indispensable role played by

Leyla Keough, who provided invaluable logistical and administrative support both before and during the conference and has worked closely with me in putting this edition together.

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Endnotes

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- ⁱ The text of this keynote was later published as part of the co-authored introduction to Chris Hann's edited collection, *Postsocialism* (Hann et al. 2001)