The anthropology of post-socialism: Theoretical legacies and conceptual futures – An introduction

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Abstract
An introduction to the special issue ‘The anthropology of postsocialism: Theoretical legacies and conceptual futures’.

Keywords
Postsocialism, anthropological theory, eastern-central Europe, ethnography, boundaries, binaries

With the fall of state socialism in eastern-central Europe and the former Soviet Union (USSR) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a region opened up for greater exploration. Moreover, a unique possibility arose to study fast-paced socio-cultural change first hand. The term ‘post-socialism’, or ‘post-communism’, was soon coined to describe a period and a state of transformation that followed the dissolution of socialist and communist regimes in eastern Europe and parts of Asia. The late 1990s and early 2000s therefore saw the publication of a plethora of ground-claiming edited volumes. Alongside these, a large amount of in-depth ethnographic work was produced. In the 1990s and 2000s there had been a sense then that the explorations of the post-socialist transformation would give rise to new theorizing and thinking that could change debates in the wider discipline of anthropology – or maybe these expectations arose post hoc. Certainly, in recent years, an apparent lack of meeting these expectations has been noted and at times bemoaned. This sense is what kindled interest for this special issue.

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The special issue asks: what are the theoretical legacies of the anthropology of post-socialism? What impact have explorations of phenomena in the region of and around the fall of state socialism had on the discipline of anthropology more widely, or what impact could they have had? In asking this, the contributions here explore two inevitable aspects of any work that attaches itself to a ‘post-’ and to an area and topic rife with political history. These are the binaries and boundaries that are always embroiled in social and cultural reproduction and that were a defining feature of the Cold War and its afterlife, but that are in need of revisiting if not deconstructing. These clearly have a spatial, but also a temporal dimension. The temporal dimension is the before and after characteristic that is implicit to a state of being ‘post’, and that is also inherent to much human meaning-making.

This introduction will provide a brief summary of the history of anthropological explorations of the former state-socialist region and of the time-period that followed its fall. It will briefly recapitulate some recent suggestions as to how to (better) conceptualize ‘post-socialism’, and go on to explain the concerns of this issue. The introduction argues that post-socialism does indeed constitute a prism that allows deeper insight into many concerns of the wider discipline. It also suggests that the articles here nevertheless show the reproduction of binaries and boundaries in moments of fundamental change, which is to be seen as an opportunity, not a limitation.

From a critique of transitology to sub-discipline

To conduct anthropological research in the state-socialist region was not a novum in 1989. Yet the number of anthropologists who had ventured into the bloc states or the Soviet Union prior to then had been limited and their endeavours were closely monitored by state agencies (Hann, 2014: 37; Verdery, 1996). As Verdery (1996: 5) describes, doing research in any part of that region was not a popular choice in the 1980s—the great, classical works had been written about Africa, Papua New Guinea, the Amazon. Apart from a limited number of Anglophone scholars, however, there were also ethnographers in and of the region who often explored ethnic groups within their countries, documenting lifestyle, material culture, ritual and beliefs (Buchowski, 2014). When the region opened up its borders, the numbers of Anglophone scholars interested in this moment of fast-paced socio-economic, political and cultural change increased rapidly, allowing the field to grow immensely.

The anthropology of the 1990s had as its focus a critique of the dominating notion of the ‘transition’. This concept, used by economists and political scientists as well as by powerful political and financial institutions, assumed that the fall of socialist/communist governments would lead through a linear development from socialism to capitalism and democracy. Anthropologists argued that such a ‘triumphalist’ assumption (for example, Berdahl, 2010; Berdahl et al., 2000; Kalb, 2002; Verdery, 1996) was misplaced as developments did not seem linear, nor was a particular outcome guaranteed. Verdery and others called for fine-grained ethnographic work to explore what had actually passed, what may arise from the ruins of state socialism and what costs such transformations would bring:
How in fact are eastern Europeans managing their exit from socialism? Just what does it take to create capitalism and ‘free markets’? What sorts of human engineering, not to mention violence, chaos and despair does that entail? What are the hidden costs of establishing new nation-state? (Verdery, 1996: 10)

And here I would add, what may be the unintended consequences of these processes? There is much that could be written regarding the reasons for this focus. One point that anthropologists had to insist on was that there would always be both change and continuity, as well as unforeseen consequences, which means that neither democracy nor capitalism could ever simply rise out of the ashes of state socialism unaffected by what had gone before. A further point is that fieldwork on the ground showed just how complex, messy and ambivalent changes were (for example Hann, 2014). Moreover, the fall of state socialism coincided with the postmodern turn in anthropology – Writing Culture had been published in 1986 (Clifford and Marcus) – which led to an increased focus on ethnography and, with that, on exploration, which came at the expense of comparison and theorizing (cf. Carrier, 2016).

The edited volumes of the late 1990s therefore often focused on the assumptions underpinning the contentious ‘transitology’ concept. Bridger and Pine (1998) for example considered economic and social restructuring. Most of these volumes, however, attempted to show the breadth and depth of the post-socialist transformation and as such discussed a variety of topics, such as decollectivization and privatization, economic and social restructuring, nationalism and ethnification, religious and spiritual revival (Abrahams, 1996; Berdahl et al., 2000; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Hann, 2002). As Buchowski pointed out in his paper presented at the panel of the EASA3 conference in 2016 that gave rise to this special issue (Buchowski, 2016), these and many other early works contributed considerably to literature on transformation and fast-paced change, property and social relations, resistance and the commodification of labour among others. The term ‘post-socialism’ is partly an outcome of this direction of the scholarship of the time. The complexities documented by this literature could not be accommodated by the concept of ‘transition’, which implies a linear, if not evolutionary, development, and was heavily ideologically loaded. The term ‘post-socialism’, and at times ‘transformation’, was chosen to avoid any suggestion of linearity and certainty. Targeted against the notion of the ‘transition’, ‘post-socialism’ captured the view that these processes of often chaotic change were wider and also multi-directional.

Over the past three decades, anthropological investigations moreover engaged in the kind of in-depth ethnographic exploration that Verdery had called for in 1996. These endeavours produced a wealth of work, which is too extensive to summarize here in full. Let it suffice to say that topics of interest have included, among others, changes to labour and social stratification (Kideckel, 2008; Lemon, 2001), privatization and the reproduction of social relations, boundaries and exclusion (Dunn, 2004; Creed, 1997; Kideckel, 1993; Verdery, 2003); changing notions of the person (Zigon, 2010); political power, resistance and politics (Kanef, 2004; Svašek, 2008); the rise of consumption (Pattico, 2008); identity (Berdahl, 1999; Ghodsee, 2005; Rausing, 2004); and nation-building and nation-loss (Holy, 1996; Oushakine, 2009; Richardson, 2008; Schwartz,
The field of memory, history-writing and nostalgia has also grown considerably in the last two decades, although it attracted attention from the outset (Skultans, 1998; Todorova and Gille, 2010; Wanner, 1998; Watson, 1994). There is also a thriving anthropology of the former Yugoslav region, which, in addition to post-socialist dynamics, charts the processes that follow conflict (Halpern and Kideckel, 2000; Jansen, 2015).

While over time the anthropology of post-socialism began to be viewed almost as a sub-discipline in its own right, the production of volumes on post-socialism, however defined, slowed. Up until 20 years after the fall of socialism most conferences of the EASA, for example, had also included workshops on aspects of post-socialism, such as in 2004 (‘encounters of the post-socialist kind’), 2006 (‘changing economies’ and the round table ‘eastern Europe as a field of anthropological enquiry’); in 2012 colleagues explored ‘new post-socialist solidarities’. In more recent years, however, it seems that post-socialism is no longer, at least not always, a concern in and of itself. Instead papers on the region feature more frequently in workshops that have wider substantive concerns, so that the fact that this example concerns a post-socialist society becomes ‘merely’ part of the ethnographic context.

The question of theoretical legacies and the utility of ‘post-socialism’

This trend is indicative of changing concerns. In the 1990s there had been a strong sense that the study of post-socialism mattered, and that there was something to studying post-socialism. Even if this sense has not entirely evaporated, over time it has lost some of its urgency. Yet recent publications, whether special issues or edited volumes, confirm that we are not yet ready to put post-socialism to bed (Dzenovska and De Genova, 2018; Giordano et al., 2014). The question of whether there is something distinctive about the post-socialist region and/or the post-socialist experience is inevitably intertwined with the question of what its study means for our common anthropological endeavours of understanding humanity and of charting human difference.

The question of the theoretical import of the field was brought up particularly vividly in a piece by Thelen and subsequent response by Dunn and Verdery in 2011. In an article for Critique of Anthropology Thelen (2011) argued that without a considerable change in direction away from preconceived (western and neoliberalist) ideas and expectations, the anthropology of post-socialism would be unable to conceive (post-)socialist societies’ true otherness and would continue to fail in its potential. Thelen suggested it would become or remain simply area studies. The debate was picked up and explored further by Hann (2014), who agreed with the criticism but suggested the answer was not in finding true alterity but to explore new categories of comparison to overcome the eastern–western, free–totalitarian, socialist–capitalist binaries that, according to Hann, remained implicit to both Thelen’s challenge (2011), and Dunn and Verdery’s (2011) response.

Another route to answering the question of the potential contribution of the anthropology of post-socialism has been through exploring connections and communalities between post-socialism and post-colonialism (Böröcz, 2006; Cervinkova, 2012; Chari...
This includes Chari and Verdery’s (2009) concern that post-colonial scholars underuse the work on (post-)socialism; suggestions of viewing eastern Europe as ‘peripheral’ alongside other world peripheries (Kojanić, 2020); and questions of why eastern European scholars at home in post-socialist societies continue to rely on ‘western’ paradigms instead of creating their own (Cervinkova, 2012: 159). A problem in these considerations is that different scholars think about different kinds of colonial dependencies when referring to eastern and central Europe. For Chari and Verdery (2009) this is about the colonialism by Russia during the period of the Soviet Union, both for states within the SU and for eastern bloc countries as well as parts of Africa; while Cervinkova’s (2012) comment on eastern scholars’ dependence refers to a kind of colonial dependency on the West. This is also why Buchowski (2014), for example, rejects post-colonial parallels – he argues that eastern Europeans wanted capitalism, which precludes an anti-colonial and thus anti-western position: “the West was seen as a liberator, protector and future ideal” (2014: 4).

It is certainly clear that the ‘triumph’ of free market democracies in the late 1980s and early 1990s has created a neo-colonial area for western policy-makers, financiers, businessman and global institutions. This in turn is the direct result of the inherently binary Cold War view of the world as dominated by two opposing forces, and of societies governed by either one or the other form of political economic organization. Chari and Verdery (2009: 21) therefore suggest redefining the field as post-Cold War Studies and expanding it beyond the usual suspects in the eastern bloc.

There has thus been much questioning of the theoretical legacies of the anthropology of post-socialism, and much bemoaning of a seeming lack influence on the wider discipline. Similarly, while the term ‘post-socialism’ has been criticized, no real alternatives have emerged. The authors in this volume agree that it is right to question whether, after 30 years and more of the end of state socialism, we as analysts should continue to draw on and potentially perpetuate binary Cold War views through the use of a post-socialist lens. The conclusion of many of the authors in this volume is, however, that such binaries evidently remain current in the field and have ongoing impact on the lives of local people. And while the term ‘post-socialism’ is vague, so much so that Kideckel (2014: 23) suggests it serves no purpose whatsoever, it is exactly its breadth that has allowed the inclusion of very many different societies, dynamics, and temporalities under its umbrella.

**Conceptual futures**

This is the core of this special issue, which asks both what the anthropology of post-socialism brings to the wider discipline, and what kind of heuristic sense the term itself still makes. To combine these points this special issue evolves around a long-standing core concern in anthropology – boundaries and binaries. Boundaries are key, as we know, in identity construction whether at individual, intersubjective or national level. We find boundaries in borders, maps, neighbourhoods and in social practices that establish belonging (Barth, 1969). During the socialist period, boundaries of states and nations were frequently redrawn, producing entities like the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and the eastern bloc. While geographical, national boundaries were again remade after 1989/1991,
ideological boundaries remained. Such boundary drawing in identity construction often entails binaries. Binaries are, as we also know, intertwined with Othering. They are moreover good to think with – certainly in emic terms binary construction underpins meaning-making in a number of different realms, including the spatial and temporal. Before and after scenarios, this-then explanations, explorations of consequences, all evolve around and serve to produce forms of binaries in time. Bruner (1991: 19), for example, explains that in narrative thinking we often turn post-hoc situations into propter-hoc explanations to make sense of the unpredictability of life – this is the case from lucky socks for world-class athletes to the apparent ‘triumph’ of free market democracies. The latter sentiment is also reproduced through binaries perceived in spatial terms – state socialism was in the ‘East’, free market democracies in the ‘West’. In more general terms, these are the differences expressed in distinctions such as here and there, over there, and on the other side – of the river, of the neighbourhood, of the border. In Germany, certainly, the terms ‘East’ and ‘West’ continue to be used to locate places on one or the other side of the former border. To escape binaries and boundaries entirely in the aftermath of an era during which international relations, as well as ideologies, were symbolized by the ‘iron curtain’ that found a spatial manifestation in the Berlin Wall and, with the Wall’s deconstruction, found a temporal positioning in the ‘prior-to-1989’ period, is therefore difficult.

This collection aims to do two things. The first is to unsettle some of the boundaries and binaries entailed in the conceptualization of post-socialism, both in a spatial and a temporal sense. The second is to then re-evaluate any boundaries or binaries, and, in some cases, to argue for their ongoing utility. This utility arises if we take them seriously as emic constructs that continue to do important work at a number of levels that, and this is crucial, go beyond any geographically bounded post-socialist setting.

The article by Nicolescu and Deakin therefore opens the discussion by suggesting extending (post-)socialism to the West through a comparison of case examples from Romania and the UK. The authors propose the notion of ‘socialist fragments’ to allow us to see how socialist ideas and practices were and are current in a variety of settings across the globe. Gallinat and Annist in turn show how binaries and boundaries continue to be reproduced in the present through temporal and spatial processes of Othering. These, in turn, stem from dynamics and structures that lie beyond the specific post-socialist setting. Annist shows how the drive for neoliberalism in Estonia produced winners and losers, whereby the latter were associated with supposed continuing Soviet ‘mentality’. Attempting to escape this situation, many migrate, but find themselves caught up in another set of now translocal and global hierarchies, which ‘bind’ all ‘eastern’ subjects at a lower end of the scale. Gallinat shows how the modern notion of progress underpins policy-making in eastern Germany, which produces a problematic socialist other that needs to be brought into the present through education. Her analysis highlights how this ideological Othering has become a prerequisite for the way the region is perceived to be democratic.

All three articles also touch on how past, present and future interweave, as beliefs about the past impact on perceptions in the present and suggest, open or close options for the future. This temporal intertwining and its complexities are the topics of Dorondel’s and Ringel’s articles. Exploring infrastructure in the Romanian countryside, Dorondel
highlights how agrarian development and construction from different time periods come together to create a particular set of circumstances in the present. Rather than socialism having been left behind, the neglect and dismantling of the large socialist-era agrarian infrastructure results in damaging excess groundwater today. This in turn highlights how differently positioned actors are more or less well able to handle this new situation, leading to considerable new social exclusions. Ringel turns to the question of temporality directly, showing how different actors and institutions see different time periods – socialist or post-socialist – as defining for a specific eastern German region and use those associations to understand present problems and to envision future solutions.

All of the articles, as well as Deema Kaneff’s thoughtful commentary, engage with the question as to whether the term ‘post-socialism’ continues to have epistemic utility. For different reasons, they all suggest that it does – from the perspective of Gallinat, Annist and Ringel because local variants of ‘post-socialism’ are used by people, media, institutions to understand their context and to act on it; for Dorondel because of the material presence of the socialist era and the way it interacts with material realities as well as social structures and power relations today. In some ways, we could call those material traces ‘fragments’, as Deakin and Nicolescu suggest, which may help us overcome limiting geographical boundaries usually associated with the study of post-socialism. But where notions of post-socialism do conceptual work on the ground, their emic use appears more monolithic than the term ‘fragment’ suggests. In this vein, Annist employs the term ‘zombie socialism’ (Chelcea and Drută, 2016), which describes ways in which references to undesirable socialism are used by the winners of the transformation to maintain power, while Gallinat suggests the notion of a ‘real existing post-socialism’ that has day-to-day political consequences. Kaneff’s commentary brings these pieces together by pointing out how the collection highlights a change in the meaning and content of the term ‘post-socialism’. To her mind, the way the concept appears in this special issue has left behind the spatial and temporal boundedness that it had in the 1990s. Instead it highlights the concept’s extended spatial reach – as migrants move from ‘East’ to ‘West’ and vice versa, and as ‘the East’ became integrated into global (neoliberal) value hierarchies – and it points to the concept’s temporal multi-layeredness.

This special issue does not have all the answers, but it brings some important insights into a debate that will no doubt continue for some time yet. The contributions featured here have been selected for their substantive concerns and their potential to contribute to the aims of this special issue, rather than for geographical representativeness.

Altogether, the articles show, each in its own way, that the exploration of post-socialist settings that underwent fundamental regime-change in economic and political terms, brings to light core anthropological and sociological processes that would otherwise remain less tangible. They therefore highlight the epistemological value of the anthropology of post-socialism, which can further anthropological thinking on a range of issues, such as migration, infrastructure, social housing or governance, and all of those mentioned in the overview at the start of this introduction. They further show that such immense historic fissures as the Cold War and its end remain embroiled in intensive, long-term work of boundary drawing around people, nations, regions and time periods, which are adapted over time but nevertheless continue to structure thought, practices and social
life for decades after. As Kaneff puts it in her commentary, the Cold War ‘continues in a more subtle but nevertheless real form through ongoing expressions of temporal and spatial domination’.

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Notes

1. Whether we call it one or the other is a historical (did the state/party in question claim socialist or communist status?), theoretical (was communism ever truly achieved?) as well as political question (I am referring to a tendency where regime-critics of state socialism tend to prefer the term communism). Within anthropology, the term ‘post-socialism’ seems to be used most frequently, but certainly not exclusively.

2. The meeting and interaction between scholars at home in the region and those coming from the ‘West’ has not been without tension or argument. See, for example, Buchowski (2014), Cervinkova (2012), Kürti (1996).

3. EASA is the European Association of Social Anthropologists. Conferences take place bi-annually.

4. Interestingly, Geoff Payne commented at a seminar given by Carrier at Newcastle in 2012 that the impact of postmodern thinking on sociology had been the opposite: a rapid increase in theorizing and a decline in empirical work. Hann (2014) further points out, partly in response to Thelen (2011), that his approach and that of many contemporaries was to use mid- to low-level theories to explore empirical phenomena.

5. Humphrey (2002) was already questioning the term’s longevity two decades ago.

6. This special issue goes back to the panel ‘Theoretical legacies of the anthropology of post-socialism’, which Anselma co-organized with Frances Pine and Haldis Haukanes at the 2016 EASA conference. The panel attracted a range of scholars, from the more established to many PhD students. The current volume is the result of the conversations and thinking that began in Milan. While some contributors were unable to finalize their papers for this issue, such as Gabriella Abercrombie, others joined in later, including Stefan Dorondel and Felix Ringel, as well as co-editor Deema Kaneff. The process of putting together this special issue turned out to be more laborious than envisioned, as our timeline encountered the pandemic, and contributors and editors had to deal with setting up working from home, childcare obligations and fast-paced changes to teaching formats and media. We are thankful for the support from Critique of
Anthropology, which has stuck with us throughout this time, and whose staff answered any queries promptly. As editors we also want to thank our contributors who have worked on their papers over a long period of time, repeatedly finding both time and enthusiasm in the midst of considerable upheaval.

7. And with the terrible conflict in the Ukraine we may now witness yet another redrawing of national boundaries. There is more to say about this fast developing situation, but the special issue was already too far into production for us to properly address this.

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