

# THE SOCIAL LIVES OF POSTSOCIALISM

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This special issue is the product of multiple trans-Atlantic collaborations. Fabio Mattioli and Caterina Borelli, guest editors of the issue and authors of this introduction, entered into dialogue to present a joint proposal for the 2012 Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). Describing postsocialism as a generative set of processes, the panel proposed to analyze multiple and creative social relations that had emerged during the transition. We asked: How do people reconfigure the socialist past as a strategy for the present? Which kinds of sociality, solidarity, and dissent emerge out of the collapse of socialism and following the introduction of neoliberal reforms? By analyzing the uncertainty of transitional moments, the panel aimed at expanding the theoretical breadth of the postsocialist paradigm so as to include the experiences and analysis of and about the new "first postsocialist generations."

The panel was welcomed enthusiastically: we received a total of thirty-three proposals (three times what we could accommodate), the majority from researchers born and raised in postsocialist countries. Despite growing skepticism surrounding the usefulness and definition of "postsocialism" in the more general domain of social sciences, the submissions demonstrated the opposite: postsocialism was widely referred to both as an *analytical concept* and as a *historical condition*. On the one hand, the researchers that we had the privilege to engage with were interested in using the analytical category of postsocialism to think critically about the complexity of their own (or other) Central Eastern European and Eurasian (hereafter CEEE) societies: in so doing, they were actively inhabiting and transforming the meaning of postsocialism beyond its arguably exogenous character. Their papers challenged the quasi-colonial hierarchies of knowledge between the "East" and the "West," while at

the same time reshaping the geopolitical reach of postsocialism as an analytical tool. On the other hand, the papers demonstrated the persistence of the historical and material social processes that “transitional” societies continue to experience in a significantly different way from countries that did not belong to the pre-1989 socialist world. These facts reinforce the need for a specific concept, both historically and geographically defined, that describes theoretically, practically, and politically the social lives and the structural constraints experienced by transitional societies. In this sense, the panel represented a formidable occasion to reflect on postsocialism as the theoretical paradigm that can serve this unifying purpose, while also contributing to rendering the plurality of postsocialisms: that is, an opportunity to think through how to theorize both the diversity and richness of historical experiences of postsocialist societies and their common articulation within the same material processes shaping CEEE’s present and future.

### CRITICAL GENEALOGIES OF POSTSOCIALISM

This issue builds upon the early work of social scientists and especially anthropologists that spread the concept of postsocialisms (plural); it also engages the recent critiques that questioned the validity of the paradigm. The concept itself enjoys a very prolific “social life”: searching on Google Scholar alone provides slightly more than five thousand entries. While it is impossible to map out all the recurrences of the term, especially across the entire spectrum of the social sciences, we can roughly identify two distinct historical phases that shaped the meaning that anthropologists ascribe to the concept.

The first period runs roughly from the early 1990s to the early 2000s and is dominated by the works of social scientists trained at British and American universities. In this phase, postsocialism is essentially defined as a material and historical *condition of life* impacting dramatically people’s lives. Concerned with socialism since the 1970s, this first generation of scholars of postsocialism produced a body of work that a) dealt with societies which used to be ruled by communist parties, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia (CEEE), and whose economies were based on the collectivization of means of production and central planning, and were undergoing a dramatic restructuring after 1989; b) shared the common starting point of refusing the easy triumphalism of Western “transitology” and contested the so-called “shock therapy” and “big bang” doctrines fostered by the main transnational organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; c) understood “transition” not as a given fact but as a process whose outcomes were unlikely to foster the planned Western-style neoliberal democracies.

The second phase starts approximately at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when a number of critical approaches to the anthropology of postsocialism proposed to radically refashion or even dissolve postsocialism as a conceptual *paradigm*. This reassessment partly originated as a critique that anthropologists of CEEE societies (Buchowski 2004, 2006; Kürti 2008) have addressed to their Western colleagues; partly it emerged as an autocritique of Western scholars trying to

reconsider the historical conditions of their intellectual production and the limits of their own work (Chari and Verdery 2009; Humphrey 2002). These critiques have both a theoretical and a practical drive. On the one hand, they expose problems of representation: this includes questioning what constitutes the *object* of study and *how* these works represent postsocialist societies. Hann (2008) suggests that the paradigm has failed to incorporate a truly historical perspective, dwelling not on the work of historically oriented anthropologists but rather on scholars and sources outside of the discipline. Pobłocki (2009) echoes this critique: for him Western postsocialist scholars have contributed to the construction and popularization of the CEEE as an European “other” by essentializing the extraordinary character of postsocialist ruptures instead of focusing on the historical continuities that run through pre- and postsocialism—a critique expressed also by Don Kalb (Hann et al. 2007:22–28).

Other critiques have denounced the politics and power relations that shaped themes and silences in the literature on postsocialism; they challenge scholars to think about the practical impact of Cold War politics on limiting research opportunities and agendas. A plethora of scholars have stressed how postsocialist interventions have failed to bridge the dialogue between the “West” and the “East”: since the seminal work of Buchowski (2006) we have been made aware of the tendency of “Western” anthropology to ignore CEEE scholars. CEEE academics, continues Buchowski, have also been complicit in suppressing possible dialogues: while some academics have been refractory to their “Western” counterparts, others have internalized this orientalist gaze and started “nesting” an orientalist perspective within their own society. Moving beyond orientalism, Kürti (2008) suggests that this lack of dialogue is the consequence of direct power relations that run through the job market as well as the publishing world: it is extremely hard for CEEE scholars to get access to the same resources as their Western colleagues, partly because they are not cited and referenced in “Western” publications. “Western” publications require very specific social and cultural capital: not many “Eastern” anthropologists can see their work recognized according to these standards.

## OUR OWN THEORETICAL POSITION

While these critiques are extremely important and timely in putting CEEE scholars in dialogue with discussions about “theories from the South” developed in and beyond anthropology, they fail to address both the *theoretical* and *ontological* value of postsocialism. Essentially, while these critiques call our attention to the politics of representation and academia, they do not address the actual material processes being experienced on the ground: they discuss postsocialism as if it constituted only a *theoretical problem* and not a *material condition*. Yet, very material processes such as the privatization of formerly collective means of production, the dismantling of political entities, and the redrawing of political imaginaries across continents exist and shape our lives independently of the categories through which scholars theorize them. Any epistemological critique of postsocialism as a *paradigm* cannot bracket

these transformations or forget the existence of a postsocialist *condition* of life, lest it become a futile exercise in self-fulfilling rhetoric. Thus far, critiques of postsocialism have provided very little that can account better or more extensively for post-1989 changes.

Theoretically, most anthropological critiques of postsocialism base their own critical charge on a limited number of studies, targeting the conceptual work of scholars like Katherine Verdery, Elizabeth Dunn, and (to a lesser extent) Michael Burawoy or Caroline Humphrey. Yet, postsocialism has been embraced and discussed by a much broader array of scholars, even within anthropology. These other authors have brought under scrutiny an extremely wide array of topics and processes, generally adopting an extremely refined historical causal analysis, discussing “East” and “West” not as binaries but as interwoven areas. Among those studies one could include discussions of subjectivity and consumption during and after socialism (Dimova 2010; Yurchak 2006); the incorporation of CEEE into the European legal and economic sphere of influence (Asher 2005; Borocz and Sarkar 2005; Jansen 2009; Jung 2011); the refashioning of political authority through NGOs, expert practices, lustration laws, and international aid (Appel 2005; Coles 2007; Pandolfi 2003); shifts in the meaning and practices of religion and its relation to political power (Creed 2011; Rogers 2009; Wanner 2007). Additionally, postsocialist approaches have allowed for discussions beyond the geographical and temporal limits of its original focus: more recently, the scope of postsocialist analysis has been expanded to consider countries outside of Europe, including Central Asia, Vietnam, Cuba, and other African, Latin American, or Asian states (Rogers 2010). In short, postsocialism as a conceptual framework has proved to be extremely inclusive and rooted in historical and processual analyses of social change: it has increasingly become a frame for theorizing “between the posts” (Chari and Verdery 2009), “post the posts” (Buyandelgeriyn 2008), the “non-post” (Gilbert 2006), or simply, the future (Kurtović 2012). Why should we abandon such a productive, expansive, and nurturing framework?

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The authors featured in this special issue both inhabit and displace the postsocialist paradigm. They expand the fields of research available to postsocialist studies, renewing and enriching the subdiscipline in very creative ways. The five contributions presented discuss the transnational paths of socialist and postsocialist migrations, the politics of aesthetics in urban centers, the “discreet economies” implemented in the hospitality sector, the role of individual leaders in rural civil society, and the reconfiguration and institutionalization of religious hierarchies.

The first three articles are marked by an increased attention to cities as crucial spaces of societal change, discussing transformations *in* and *of* postsocialist cities. This reflects the centrality of cities for the dynamics of capital worldwide, as stressed by many current geographical and anthropological works (Harvey 1989, 2005; Smith 1996, 2008; Whitehead 2008). However, making urban spaces attractive for rent-seeking entrepreneurs in CEEE implies very complicated negotiations over political

issues: urban spaces are often situated in uncertain “regimes of property” (Verdery 2003) whereby the conflict over use and ownership can lead to unpredictable outcomes—including cross-class alliances and solidarities between “squatters” and “rightful owners” (Johnson 2012). Further, the privatization and financialization of urban spaces operated by local and foreign investors intersects with the ideological and material processes of European integration: cities are crucial in mediating the symbolic and material incorporation of CEEE into the political sphere of the European Union.

Kruglova’s article is situated at the crossroad of these economic and political transformations: it describes the consequences of a “cultural revolution” exercised through the beautification of urban space in Perm’, Russia. With the intent of opening the city symbolically and materially to European flows of creativity (and investment), urban planners populated the lived spaces of postsocialist Perm’ with “cultural” objects and sculptures. As Kruglova notes, if on the one hand this process of imposing a new sensory hierarchy of what constitutes sanctioned and legitimate “culture” resuscitated Soviet definitions of “high” and “low” culture, on the other hand it conflicted with localized imaginaries of pleasure and aesthetics. Through passionate descriptions, Kruglova leads the reader on a tour of a landscape of sensual pleasure that evokes Permiaks’ embodied experiences of the urban environment. She argues that for the people who stroll along the street of Perm’, or sit for an (illegal) drink in Perm’s parks, the pleasure of their activity is constituted by its simplicity: if a child cannot understand some of the new sculptures, it means these expressions of art are wrong. By referring to an “economy of senses,” Kruglova touches upon the process of Europeanization in its sensorial and visceral aspects; her article opens paths for thinking about the commodification of space, and its relation to economic processes and to aesthetic choices and preferences.

Hüwelmeier’s article also speaks of the transformation of current cities; yet her thrust is to analyze not local reactions to globalized projects but their transnational spillovers. Hüwelmeier focuses on the constitution of a network of bazaars in countries of the former socialist bloc, mostly operated and run by Vietnamese migrants. With historical precision and detail she traces the genealogy of these spaces, disclosing a kind of globalization—the international connections between “second world” countries—which has been ignored by theorists of postmodern fluxes and networks, but also by scholars of postsocialism(s). Building on this, Hüwelmeier shows the tribulations that ex-COMECON migrants have endured after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and demonstrates that the role of bazaars (in Prague, Berlin, Warsaw) is to sustain and reshape these networks. Now is a time when the discussion of migration fluxes and policies within Europe is both politically and theoretically crucial. Numberless scholars denounce “fortress Europe” (Agier 2008; Green 2005) and show the structural limitations of the politics of assimilation (Mandel 2008; Soysal 2001) and humanitarian aid (Dunn 2012). Hüwelmeier offers us a much needed contribution describing the power relations and hierarchies inscribed by legal instruments and categories in the bazaar (including bilateral agreements, citizenship requirements etc.); she shows both how migrants adapt to these constraints and how they resourcefully construct networks of solidarity to circumvent them.

The deregulation of economy and the proliferation of new “industries” ushered in a revolution in postsocialist countries: following the bankruptcy of national industries, many states have become repositories for Western companies’ cheap production, have tried to boost their service sectors, or developed reserves of labor to be exported. Hajdáková’s article captures this shift and its consequences in the hospitality sector. This piece brings the reader to one of the most famous luxury restaurants in Prague, exploring the complex relationships that are built through the interactions between customers and hosts. Hajdáková shows how postsocialist transformations have affected restaurant workers in the Czech Republic, transforming them from privileged “bosses” of their customers to hosts now expected to treat guests to their every desire. Describing these new hierarchies with wit, Hajdáková focuses on the morality that is both implied and denied in economic exchanges taking place on the restaurant floor: On the one hand, it is obvious that the “luxury” implemented in the neoliberal atmosphere of the restaurant hides a mechanism for the extraction of money from guests and hosts alike. On the other hand, this “materialist” aspiration needs to be concealed in order for luxury to be accepted as real: this leads Hajdáková to speak of “discreet economies” whereby the morality of the market consists precisely of denying the self-interest linked to the exchange through complicated rituals and techniques of (self-)discipline. Hajdáková’s focus on both the constraints felt by workers and their strategies to recuperate some autonomy vis-à-vis their guests’ desires delineates the complex forms of “affective labor” (Muehlebach 2011) that have recently been discussed in and beyond economic anthropology: It brings to wider anthropological attention a sector, the restaurant industry, and a kind of work, “hospitality,” that have been growing exponentially in recent years. It further provides the reader an interesting case with which to think about the intricacies of economic interest and moral sentiment, a classic theme debated in economic anthropology that since the work of Mauss, Firth, Malinowski, and Gregory has stirred much controversy, and that is being explored and stretched further by recent contributions (Hann and Gudeman forthcoming).

The last two articles focus less on urban and economic changes, privileging the transformation of networks of power. In her extensive discussion of rural Poland, Pasięka argues that anthropological accounts of postsocialist transformation can and should focus on rural civil society and specifically on its leaders. Motivated by a political and scholarly commitment to overthrow the “self-orientalist” image of rural Poland as backward, Pasięka suggests that discussing individual leaders’ strategies and roles in this transformation does not mean discarding a grassroots perspective. On the contrary, Pasięka’s local leaders, situated halfway between the public realm and the private, are embedded in a network of social relations: narrating the lives of three key interlocutors becomes an entry point to paint the landscape of social relations in the Polish province of Uście Gorlickie. Pasięka’s analysis shows the creativity and ability that are needed to mobilize and transform competencies, networks, and resources acquired during the socialist past, adapting them to the new era. In a moment when the Polish countryside is impacted by an avalanche of reforms that will “harmonize” it to the European Union standards and governance, local

leaders resort to Soviet-style tactics to provide for the “common good” of the community. But do not be fooled: Pasięka is very aware that the “common good” in question is an essentially contested and conflicting notion. Carefully teasing out the articulation of “common” goods (plural), she explores how new and old hierarchies mold each other and shape the rural civil society of the Polish countryside.

Pimenova’s article likewise deals with the transformation of structures of power, bringing the reader to the Russian province of Tuva. The article discusses the role of shamans and shamanic associations during the Soviet period and their evolution until today. What Pimenova argues is that shamans have been progressively incorporated into the formal structure of the state through the bureaucratization of various shamans’ associations. Thanks to this newly institutionalized position, shamanic leaders have acquired decisive political weight in Russian high politics, yet the bureaucratization of shamans’ power structure transformed not only the kind of practices performed but also their relations with the community of believers. With this elegantly argued piece, Pimenova contributes to a growing body of literature on the political lives of religion in CEEE (Bernstein 2011; Humphrey and Onon 1996). She does so not by reiterating the well-worn paradigm of de-etatization (Verdery 1996); instead, Pimenova discusses the creative rearrangement of powers born of the chaotic refashioning of Russian, and by extension CEEE, societies. Presenting an intriguing case of “re-etatization” of power, this piece joins the work of Claverie (2003), Pelkmans (2009), Rogers (2009), and a plethora of other scholars who have recently discussed shifts in the “official” category of religion; it also shows how changes at the “margins” of postsocialist societies can be directly linked to major political (and by extension economic or social) events. In fact, showing the direct connections between Putin’s reforms in Russia and the “verticalization” of shamanic power, Pimenova’s very ethnographic sensibility reminds the reader of the interconnectedness of core and periphery in postsocialist societies. It leaves us with the hope that if today the “core” is colonizing the “periphery,” tomorrow it might be the vernacular of the marginal worlds reshaping the high politics of European centers of power.

### **MAKING SPACE FOR NEW TOPICS AND FUTURES: POSTSOCIALISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

As these articles creatively show, it is anachronistic to dispose with the concept of postsocialism when more recent contributions are already transforming it to cover new ground. In fact, postsocialism as a concept is productive not only because of its reference to a “post” but also in relation to the “socialist” experience and its afterlives. Studies of postsocialism have often tried to start off by discussing the role and characteristics of socialist regimes; in “transitology” denigrating the vagaries of socialism has been crucial to celebrating the arrival of democracy and capitalism. On the contrary, the first generation of postsocialist anthropologists went beyond criminalizing socialism, stressing the violence and the turmoil created by the “democratic” economic and social orders. Yet, thinking about the historical



experiences of socialism has not stopped there: today, an increasing number of studies consider the role of socialist experiences as a resource (Nadkarni 2007; Oushakine 2007; Petrović 2010). This is not to say that scholars are reevaluating socialism per se, but they are paying more and more attention to how particular political spaces, networks of solidarity, and social values created during socialism block and transform the trajectory of neoliberalism today. Increasingly, the socialist experience is reinvented by alternative social movements which, despite embodying a variety of contradictory ideals (from nationalism to anarchism), refer to and recast socialist ideas and networks as a resource for rethinking our political world. In other words, if it can be stated that postsocialist countries are a laboratory for neoliberalism, their experience of socialism is emerging as a powerful tool for redrawing the trajectory of neoliberalism itself. In order to account for the reemergence of socialist values in CEE, we need a concept that theoretically links socialism, its chaotic collapse, and the potential futures that are thus opened. Postsocialism as a paradigm is thus crucial precisely as an “othering” tool: one through which the diversity of the historical processes experienced by transitional societies can be understood not as a liability but as a resource for their future.

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