

"New Postsocialist Ontologies and Politics": The Annual Symposium of SOUYZ, March 2011

The Research Network for Postsocialist Cultural Studies

March 11-12, 2011

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Symposium theme:

The purpose of the conference is to build on and advance a new and exciting direction in postsocialist studies, a paradigm we may call the relational perspective. Such explorations have rested on three approaches: 1) the conceptualization of the global context of state and postsocialism; 2) the questioning of directionality between this global context and the former "Second World;" and 3) the political implications of rethinking the global context as itself postsocialist.

Existing social science and humanities scholarship has acknowledged various global economic, social, and cultural contexts of state socialism and postsocialism, though to a limited degree. For example, some have argued that existing socialist countries were either part and parcel of the capitalist world-system or—a more moderate view—that they simultaneously exhibited an economic dependence on the West and political dependence on Moscow. Others have positioned postsocialism vis-à-vis modernity in particular ways, arguing that state socialism was a version of modernity and/or that the social movements and civic activities that helped bring communism down were demonstrably postmodern. Another group of scholars has compared central planning to the Fordist-Keynesian version of Western capitalism and the developmental state, and the current neoliberal transformations to the flexible accumulation phase of global capitalism and neoliberal governmentality. Yet another group of scholars has emphasized the key role environmental movements played in the collapse of communism, exhibiting a global shift towards reflexive modernity, risk society, and ecological modernization. Finally, and most recently, scholars, primarily in the humanities, have started investigating the similarities and differences between colonialism and the Soviet/Russian empires, on the one hand, and the similarities and differences between postcolonialism and postsocialism on the other.

These linkages have greatly inspired many area studies scholars, and even those studying "postsocialist" countries in Latin-America, Asia, and Africa, and we welcome further explorations of these relations. However, we would also like to pose the question of whether eastern European socialism and its collapse might also be constitutive of these differently conceptualized global contexts and 'posts'. Three examples for such a conceptualization of the global context are a) Johanna Bockman and Gil Eyal's claim that neoliberalism was developed and tested in vivo in eastern Europe; b) Alexei Yurchak's and Dominic Boyer's argument that the similarities between late socialist aesthetics and current uses of political irony in the West shed light on the ontological entangledness of Western liberalism and East-European state socialism; and, finally, c) Katherine Verdery and Charad Shari's call not just for more dialogue between postsocialist and postcolonial studies but a research agenda that investigates how the former Second and Third Worlds have been mutually constitutive. In this symposium we seek to reimagine the global context of state and postsocialism by questioning the currently dominant directionality of relations among the "three worlds."

Ultimately, we must also address the possible epistemological and political implications of such new ontologies. One possible way to do so might be to engage with political philosopher Nancy Fraser's concept of the postsocialist politics that moves away from the traditional leftist politics of (re)distribution by integrating it with the politics of recognition and of representation. Here we're

asking questions about the circulation of political imaginaries during the Cold War and after 1989. Other approaches however are also welcome.

The format of the symposium:

The symposium will start with a keynote debate between Katherine Verdery and Michael Burawoy on this “traffic between the posts.” The rest of the symposium will follow the usual panel format but enriching it with other invited faculty’s commentaries. These are scholars whose work has inspired many of these ontological and epistemological experiments, and they include Maria Todorova, József Böröcz, Johanna Bockman, Bruce Grant, and Lynne Haney.

Practicalities:

We will have some limited resources to contribute to graduate students’ and regional scholars’ travel expenses.

Submit your 300-word abstracts to Zsuzsa Gille at gille@illinois.edu

We will get back to you by January 15, 2011. In the subject of your email please mention Soyuz 2011, and in the text of your message please indicate your need financial assistance.