

***Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic.* Luehrmann, Sonja, Indiana University Press, 2011, 292 pages**

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Within the field of sociology and anthropology of religion most of the studies that focus on the emerging religious subjectivities and practices in post-communist countries operate according to a predictable epistemological *topoi*: that radical rupture and complete break with the communist-atheist past. This discourse distributes on one side the secular-atheist regime which the communists managed to impose on all levels of society (in line with a radical modernization project that wanted to create the New Human Being) and on the other side the massive post-communist religious revival which culminated with militant national-religious regimes, Church-State allegiances and post-secular forms of citizenships. Sonja Luehrmann's book "*Secularism Soviet Style. Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic*" represents a fascinating ethnographic attempt to show the various continuities, junctures and convergences between these two periods and expose the limits and shortcoming of the epistemology that underlines most of the religious studies of the former Soviet bloc.

The book aims at capturing the connections between the didactic and pedagogical methods that were employed by the Communist party activists in order to forge a new form of immanent and secular subjectivity together with a class-free society and the post-communist religious strategies and techniques that are used by religious establishments (especially by the Evangelical religious movements) in organizing church related activities and expansion of disciple networks. Set in the present-day autonomous Republic of Mari (Volga Region, Russian Federation) Luehrmann's book is a fascinating anthropological inquiry into the every-day lives of post-communist citizens that focuses especially on four religious groups: Orthodox, Protestant-Lutherans, Evangelical (especially Pentecostal and Charismatic) and Traditional Mari Religion (Chimarij) and the way these religious groups appropriate the secular mobilization and didactic techniques that were forged during the Soviet period. Because of this, a great part of the book is devoted to the reconstruction of how Communism functioned at the level of party networks and structures that were engaged in organizing the new society through a secular emancipation projects. This enables the author to explore through interviews and archive work the various spaces of interaction that existed during the Soviet period between Communist activists and (still) religious communities that did not want to give up easily the 'opium of the masses'; and so to reconstruct the social technologies, networks of propaganda and pedagogical methods that were employed in order to generate a new mode of subjectivity and a horizontal, non-divisive society.

The chapters of the book are grouped in four sections (Affinities, Promises, Fissures and Rhythms) and focus on specific themes: tactical strategies of communist secularization (chapter

1 and 2), pedagogical methods employed by both secular and religious groups (chapter 3 and 4), a critique of the old and new horizons of communist and post-communist modes of authenticity (chapter 5 and 6) and finally, post-Soviet religious hybridization of didactic technologies of the self (chapter 7).

The central axis of the research is based on Weber's concept of "elective affinities" that is employed by the author to show that the use of didactic methods constitute an important flection "[...] *between Soviet atheist and post-Soviet religious practice, and has had an effect on the 'ecclesiology' of some secularist and religious groups: their doctrine about the nature of their community and the mechanisms that hold it together. In particular, the network of teacher-student relationships held together by methodical instructions, was a Soviet way of organizing social relations that had a curious afterlife in religious practice. (60)*"

Later on in the book Luehrmann comes to the conclusion that this is not the case of the majority of the religious population (since Orthodoxy – almost 48 % of the Mari population according to <http://sreda.org/arena> - escapes totally this methodical mode of religiosity in favor of a more hierarchical model of religious transmission) and that these patterns are active to a certain degree among the local pagan cults (6% self declared, but could go up to 25% according to some estimates), and mostly among the Evangelical groups (altogether not more than 6-7%), especially among the Charismatics (but also among Baptists, Pentecostals and Lutherans). The author does not provide much socio-demographical information regarding the existing religious structure of Mari society, so it's hard to assess the degree of permeability of these Soviet methodologies within contemporary religious culture. The fact the Evangelical groups develop the same type of practices of the self, religious technologies and group-networking in U.S, Latin America and Africa could hint to the fact that the affinities Luehrmann explores are not so much Soviet legacies but deeper genealogical connection between Marxism and Protestantism, parallel developments of social ontologies that sprung out of modernity and aimed at generating new forms of communities, ethical subjects, and vocational inner-worldliness. The book does not reveal specific post-Soviet trademarks of Evangelical religious methodologies; rather we see a vast network of post-Protestant forms of subjectivization practices that are expanding with great velocity at a global scale (in Soviet and post-Soviet). The author rightly distances herself from framing the communist/post-communist transmission in terms of causality, in favor of an interdependent model (p.218-219), nevertheless the idea of Soviet legacy that permeates religious culture acts as a strong framework that organizes the material of the book.

What becomes clear during the in-depth incursion in the multiple life-histories, archive material, spaces of secular and religious interactions and pedagogical methodologies is the limited impact atheism had in terms of eradicating religion. Luehrmann elaborates little on this since she is interested in showing how the *material* and *technical* aspects of organizations (the expansion of party networks) are reproduced from one period to the other. This enables us to decouple on one hand the subjectivities (and correlated practices of the self), local ontologies and meaningful community structures and on the other hand the systemic requirements of state structures that wanted to bureaucratically organize society through social engineering and the re-

assemblage of every-day life. Atheism did not only fight against the social fragmentation and divisiveness of religion but also attempted to annihilate any type of pluralism (from ideological pluralism to world-view pluralism). When atheism as a top to bottom subjectification process failed to a great extent, secularism was deployed as mode of controlling the public sphere and the institutional network through which the communist society was constructed. What Luehrmann's book enables us to see is that the disappearance of the communist system has not meant the deletion of all the social technologies, organizational cultures and strategies of community management – they were re-assembled and re-appropriated in new ways by emerging post-communist societies.