

## TOWARDS AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF GOVERNANCE

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### I.

Let me say first that the question posed by the panel's circulated proposal, concerning the impact of the upheavals of the late 1980s in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union on anthropological practice, seems both entirely appropriate and extremely complex.<sup>1</sup> After all, one reading of the history of anthropology suggests that there is a close link between the internal state of the discipline, its reigning methodological and conceptual tools and practices, and the political and social upheavals experienced by those societies that became laboratories for the creation of anthropological knowledge. According to this reading, American anthropology, for example, while certainly underway during the first two-thirds of the 19th century, was thinkable and practiceable as a scientific enterprise connected to a specific theoretical agenda only after the destruction of Native American societies as autonomous political groups in the 1860s and 70s. To radically historicize the culture concept in the United States, this reading revisits the early expeditions among the societies of the Northwest Coast, whose military pacification, economic impoverishment, and political domination "clarified" social life so that "culture" became both visible and theorizable. And as to post-WWII anthropology, this reading might link the undermining of anthropology as a scientific project to the decolonization process of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. For example, in 1947, a colonial government that operated through the mediation and manipulation of Indian Culture gave way to the self-rule of nearly 600 million people; the new rulers inherited a system of "domination without hegemony," in Ranajit Guha's words, which continues to shape the societies of India into the 21st century. Given the upheavals on the subcontinent, it seems hardly surprising that it was a student of South Asia who pointed anthropology in the direction of "scapes," those fluid, juxtaposed terrains where identities overflow their geographic homes like streams overflowing narrow banks. Given these upheavals, it seems natural that historians of India began to develop withering critiques of the epistemological assumptions of anthropology in the first decades after independence. Of course there are other sources of anthropology's contemporary fissioning than the flourishing democratic chaos in South Asia, but the sub-continent certainly proved a key site for critics to proceed with anthropology's self-dissection.

The events in Eastern Europe since 1989 are certainly on par with these other upheavals; the collapse of socialism and the end of the Cold War represent an historical watershed that will remain the object of discussion and debate for many decades. However, the suggestion made in the call for papers for this panel, that this upheaval will certainly reorient anthropological practice, seems to me to be a difficult argument to make for a variety of reasons. First there are the caveats provided by the sociology of knowledge, which remind us that the formation of new paradigms are events not only in the realm of ideas but also in the social realms of universities, colleges, publishing houses, and media; new paradigms depend on a convergence of intellectual and market interests to flourish. But in general, it seems to me that the multitude of events that made this transformation possible are too close to us in time, and too ambiguous in their significance, for us to be able to relate them easily to shifting kinds of anthropological paradigms. Although I should add that the radically historicizing perspective referred to above might just see the collapse of socialism as doing more to hasten the discipline's dissolution than to provide it with new energy and purpose. A radical and pessimistic reading of the future of the discipline might argue that without the threat of communism, the social sciences are finally free to assist marketing strategists and public relations experts in their pursuit of the only transcendental goal we have left, to provide comfortable, normal lives for the planet's inhabitants no matter what their culture happens to have handed them at birth. We could easily

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dismiss such a polemic if the processes it describes were not already well underway. Nevertheless, I take the question behind the panel's organization as a compelling and disturbing one: what does anthropology have to contribute to understanding the political and social upheavals in Eastern Europe?

In this paper I want to suggest the value of a framework built around the concept of governance for analyzing the transformation of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that such a framework might prove useful to the discipline in the necessary task of helping anthropologists to place their ethnographic material within a discourse adequate to the discursive, experiential, and political processes that shape their own lives and the lives of their informants. The framework of governance suggests we think most carefully and deeply about the phenomenon of subjectivity, and to inquire into the interface between the cultural shaping of subjectivities and their political-economic production. The concept of governance does not admit of any kind transcendental subject or purpose in History, preferring to stay on the most mundane level of phenomenal time in which human beings *continually become* in their interactions with others and with the possibilities offered by the past. It conceives of any social site as being a knot of techniques that determines this shaping, or in Foucault's words, "the conduct of conduct." If this sound too structuralist, this framework of inquiry fully accepts the argument that part of any subjectivity is agency, and that accounts of social sites that view individuals as merely objects upon which power operates are seriously wanting. Equally problematic, however, is the view of agency as being the analytic category that provides the key to historical understanding, allowing us to retrospectively liberate the enchained actors of the past. Governance suggests that the work of liberation is performed not in the inevitably frustrated gesture of reaching towards the oppressed figure in the historical mirror, but in the clarification of the conditions under which one lives in the present, conditions given to us in the dense matrix of historical traces. It assumes furthermore that many forms of conflict and contestation underway in the contemporary world can be usefully understood as conflicts over modes of governing, requiring us to focus on the centers of governance from which these strategies are disseminated; and it suggests that we consider how these strategies are changed as they become part of the mix of meanings by which individuals rule themselves. Finally, governance presumes the centrality of the concept of freedom, though not in the sense of the narrow band of freedoms within which liberal subjects are allowed to act, but in the experiential sense of finding ourselves on new, more intricate terrains of understanding of our own making. We might begin to see the value of this concept if we first acknowledge the new conditions for doing ethnography in Eastern Europe that have taken shape in the last decade.

## II.

The collapse of socialism has presented anthropologists of Eastern Europe with a basic predicament not faced by their teachers and mentors. This predicament is such that it is possible to understand how some of our senior colleagues in the subfield might feel a twinge of nostalgia for the bad old days of socialism. Not that they have any fond memories of the absurdities and oppressive paranoia of state socialist regimes, but their work disrupted Cold War discourse about communism, countering ideologically justified ignorance. Their work spoke to the experiences of individuals living under this radically different system of economic organization. These ethnographies were inherently powerful critiques of ideology, as well as disinterested analyses of places and groups.

For most anthropologists, the circumstances of fieldwork have changed as a function of the change of governments in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. As far as the reproduction of the discipline goes, this has been a positive change, as the last decade has seen a significant increase in the ethnographic work on formerly socialist states. It is now completely normal to see articles, panels, and conferences about groups living in the states of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Russia. And yet what is absent from this new work is the sense of confidence I alluded to earlier, confidence that came from the certainty that scholarly work is itself concrete

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action and protest against ignorance. What confronts the ethnographer today is not only ignorance about suffering but also massive, pervasive, real suffering, no longer an oppressive socialist state but an incompetent capitalist one, not only a suspicious (post)Cold War mentality but also a desire to make everything better. What has changed is the place of the West in these societies. Instead of being that not so obscure, but certainly impossible object of desire, the West is now present in manifold ways. The ethnographer is no longer observing how “they” live, how “they” organize their economy, how “they” exploit their populace, or how “they” manipulate culture to stay in power. Since 1989 the ethnographer records the presence of us as well them, we are present in the form of television, advertising, and automobiles; we are embodied in the legions of bankers, philanthropists, advisers, management consultants, and media personnel who handle the Eastern European accounts. We are also present in a more abstract but no less important way in the institutions we have sponsored and introduced, like stock markets, parliaments, law codes. Ethnographers must also now record the reaction to “us” on the part of them, like the 26,000 letters that McDonald’s of Canada received in response to their ad seeking 600 employees for their first restaurant in Moscow. In the context in which the background is no longer secure, the problems of identifying an ethnographic site and of establishing an ethnographic purpose become a predicament because it is impossible to crop one’s “own” society out of the ethnographic picture.

Of course anthropologists of other parts of the world have been concerned with these problems for some time now. But the fact that socialist states constructed a social, economic, and political system that operated in stark contrast to that of the West helped to insulate anthropologists of socialist societies from the debates of the 1970s and 80s about the global system, as well as from the various epistemological critiques of the discipline that began to appear in the 1970s. Socialist states existed in their own kind of isolation, not so much primitive as different. But today, ethnographers of post-socialist states have to ask themselves questions that anthropologists of other parts of the world have been asking themselves for a while now, what sort of sense do we seek from studies that ultimately define their object in terms of a geographically defined space or territory? What sort of authenticity do we assume lies in our recordings of the voices of our informants? What kind of closure do we seek from the fieldwork experience? How do we know that the knowledge we produce about those people over there is really about “them”? These questions are certainly difficult, but there is a worse danger in not addressing them, that we somehow re-cultivate the societies of Eastern Europe by applying to them the methods and concepts that define an anthropology that is no more.

The concept of governance, however, seems immensely useful in thinking through both these new conditions of study and the situations of millions of people in Eastern Europe who are struggling to make sense of their lives. Like the concept of culture, governance offers us a kind of mental grip on the present, without having the disadvantage of evoking something bounded, distinct, and abstracted from history. Borrowing terms used by Armand Mattelart in his discussion of the “invention of communication” we could say that governance is culture developing under the influence of interconnections, mediations, and flows. Governance not only embraces but takes as its essential object operations of power, operations it describes with concepts like political logics, economic rationalities, practices of liberty, strategies of coercion and consent. Finally, governance takes for granted the fact that all societies are in one way or another coping with the problems set out by “modernity,” with the erosion of the power that emanated from “what came before,” an erosion caused in part by the expansion of a global economic system that has for five centuries woven together a fabric of mediations managed by an immensely complex array of institutions, discourses, and practices. More and more societies are coping with the imperative of constant recalibration between liberty and coercion, law and decree, manipulation and management.

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But before we take up the work of describing where formerly socialist societies' might be in the process of enframing by the West, it is crucial to begin with some idea of where "the West" is in this unfolding problematic of governance.

### III.

Since the second half of the 18th century western societies have inhabited what Foucault termed a "liberal problem-space." He employed this spatial metaphor to stress the ways governance is not only a list of philosophical principles and a set of political institutions; equally important is that the field of liberal action is marked out by a way of talking, thinking, and feeling. The establishment of this way of talking was a momentous development in European history, for it is difficult for us to think about politics in any way that does not take for granted the central category of the liberal universe: the autonomy of the person and the safeguarding of liberty by right. It is impossible for us to resurrect the Great Chain of Being as the basis for our political system. While this way of speaking has undergone significant changes since the 1750s, it still occurs within the space first marked out by the philosophers, officials, and professionals who argued for liberalism's self-evident truths in the 18th century. Foucault called this a *problem-space* because within it appeared the essential question, how to govern, or more specifically, how to manage the liberty necessary for what the classical liberal thinkers understood as the unconstrained expression of mankind's natural tendency to truck, barter, and exchange. "Politics" became the ever widening terrain where improvised solutions to the problems of managing freedom were described and deployed.

Foucault's contribution to our understanding of this history was to point out, first, how private interests were themselves expressions of disciplinary discourses that had as their goals new ways of instructing individuals how to reflect on and manage their own conduct. And secondly he stressed the ways that conduct was guided at-a-distance, through the operation of expert knowledges that engendered an institutional matrix within which certain kinds of practices were encouraged and others discouraged. He showed how liberty arose in the midst of these two spheres of the disciplining of bodies and the discovering of biopolitical truths.

If these were the basics of classical liberalism, then significant improvisations at the end of the 19th century created what we commonly refer to as the welfare state, which involved a deeper embedding of the individual in society by means of an expanding range of expertise that guaranteed "social security and social protection in return for duties of social obligation and social responsibility" (Rose 1996:41). The welfare state grew in conjunction with a proliferation of discourses about the self, discourses that led to ever more ways of acting upon citizens through administrative, bureaucratic, and institutional channels. Then after World War II, there appeared another permutation in liberal rationalities of government, now based on criticisms of the welfare state as a vast and unwieldy institution that devalued and diminished liberty through its endless generation of supervision and controls. This "neo-liberal" rationality of governance takes many forms of state action as its target, although we should not take its call for "less government" as meaning "fewer policies" or "less governing"; what is at issue for neo-liberalism is the streamlining of liberty's management, not the erasure of liberal space altogether. Neo-liberals promote models of autonomy and enterprise as the best solution for both the dilemmas of managing the self and the problems of macro-social conflict. These versions of liberalism should not be thought of as completely displacing the one that appeared before it; 19th century classical liberalism, 20th century welfare liberalism, and late 20th century neo-liberalism are rationalities of government that act simultaneously within our liberal problem-space, diagnosing ills and prescribing solutions according to their own logics and favored techniques.

### IV.

This perspective on the western present as being an unfolding site of a multiplicity of projects of liberal governance is an important starting point for turning to the transformations of the societies of '89. It helps immensely, for example, in thinking about the timing of the fall of communism. It is

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vital to recognize that perestroika took shape under the intellectual tutelage of neo-liberals Reagan and Thatcher, that it was precisely the neo-liberal rhetorics of entrepreneurial dynamism and “responsibilization” that attracted Gorbachev to reform in the first place. It was as if Reagan and Thatcher were the true pioneers of perestroika, with their attacks on the coal miners and the air traffic controllers, so that by 1985 it was Gorbachev’s turn to pick up the concept and run with it. Gorbachev, furthermore, could agree with the two free world leaders that the problem was the intrusive state, a state which kept people from “enterprising themselves.” At the very least, we should examine how it wasn’t only the big stick of SDI that convinced Soviet leaders of the foolishness of their faith in socialism, it was also the discursive carrot of neo-liberalism.

The history of governance in the West summarized above provided both the context for the rise of socialism as an alternative form of governance in the 19th century, and it also offers itself today to Eastern European reformers as a toolbox of policies with which to “fix” their broken societies. However the assumption that one could transit from one mode of governance to another as one glides between train stations has been proven deeply problematic, and in the rest of this essay I would like to explore this in more detail. If reformers have made one central mistake it lies in not recognizing that real socialism created a particular dynamic of governance that provided a dense and unpredictable context for the introduction of liberal institutions, values, and freedoms.

The question of governance in the Soviet Union is a problem that historians have yet to really confront. We have studies of governmental institutions, we have studies of the use and effectiveness of propaganda, we have histories of the Soviet Union’s terror apparatus and how civil order was maintained, and we have works that address daily life in some fashion, but we are only beginning to make sense of Soviet governance. Nor is there any account of the degree to which Soviet governance was both a departure from and a continuation of governance under the autocracy. We have only bits and pieces of the picture.

Marxists who in the 19th century speculated on the nature of a post-capitalist society presumed that another order of subjectivity would come into being under socialism, that socialist man would somehow be a new kind of person. Indeed one conspicuous feature of early Bolshevik culture was the immense work on the self demanded by the party in order to destroy one’s bourgeois habits of thought and feeling. Yet this art-historical modernist remaking died out with the cultural revolution of the late 20s, when self-fashioning was reduced to obedience. Stalinism demanded that one’s subjectivity be on constant public display, turned inside out as it were. This had the paradoxical result of opening up a space of privacy or interiority that was both a product of the state’s extension and intrusion, and at the same time a space of free of the state’s interference. The roots of the kitchen table public sphere of the 1970s and 80s lay in the public confessions of faith demanded and enacted in the 1930s.

These events in the realm of the self occurred at the same time that a transformation occurred in the nature of state action. Within the autocratic state, you will recall, governance operated both in terms of the immanence of a divinely designed social order, and the violence of an elaborate hierarchy of estates within which everyone had to display deference to the rank above them. The action at-a-distance that the liberal states of Western Europe and North America came to rely on during the early decades of the 20th century as they moved towards the model of welfare capitalism—namely the shaping of conduct through a multitude of official and semi-official agencies, each predicated on the creation and possession of a particular kind of expert knowledge—also began to appear in Russia at the end of the 19th century, as professional associations and institutes were founded, dedicated to fostering particular kinds of expertise. However, most incipient institutions of civil society were all closed by the Bolsheviks, and during the Civil War coercive governance was put in place of this proto-form of political governance. But while the apparatus of coercion continued to operate on the party and intelligentsia in the 1930s, the party turned to other means of

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governance with regard to the great mass of the population. A Stalinist kind of identity politics took shape, in which all Soviet citizens were to identify as agents of socialist construction.

As we turn to the post-Stalin era, what stands out is how the Soviet state, while renouncing mass coercion, did not produce any other truthful discourses through which to organize the experiences of their citizens besides the originary discourse of Marxism-Leninism. In the course of the 1960s and 70s, and ironically as a result of the significant progress that the Soviet state made in education, other sources of governance came to exist parallel to but outside the official one. Soviet society became more self-governing than ever. The Soviet state could not transform itself into a Western style welfare state that could act at-a-distance by means of expert knowledges, because this would mean relinquishing the unifying vision of socialism that was the sole property of the communist party. The state was thus dependent on only one kind of connection to its subjects, namely public and self-professed declarations of identity, while citizens increasingly looked in other places for sources and guides for self-formation and conduct.

This sketch of the dilemmas of Soviet governance suggests the key problem for the post-socialist liberal state: how does it operate on and through subjectivities, when the subjectivities of the newly “liberated” have never been trained to participate in liberal forms of state action? Likewise, if we look from the point of view of individuals taking up the suggestion of post-socialist governments to create new lives based on new freedoms, we note that individuals have been able to take up a range of new discourses and practices with which to form selves, and yet they are not assisted in this process by any agency of the state that would contribute to the security and stability of the social field. What seems to us to be the lawlessness of post-communism is produced not only by the weakness and poverty of the state, but also because the social field is so weakly integrated into people’s lives. In such circumstances, enormous pressure is placed on a moral sense developed in the more or less accidental process of character formation to guide conduct. The social becomes a terrain that supports the isolated pursuit of fantasmatic objects, rather than a field of discourse where subjects formed.

## **VI.**

In order to analyze this situation, ethnographers of post-socialism might productively combine two strategies. First, in order to understand the simultaneous presence of the West in the East, we might think of the process of Eastern Europe’s incorporation into Foucault’s problem-space as the constitution of an immanent theater of (neo)liberalism. We might orient ourselves to the post-socialist situation by first identifying the characters, scenes, plots and subplots, that carry the neo-liberal theme across and through the improvisatory spaces of everyday life. This means paying special attention to the interaction of media and publics, as the “transition” is plotted and re-plotted by experts who saturate public space with new forms and genres of knowledge, from the reporting of economic statistics to the expositions of the “philosophies” of finance ministers. Ethnography is crucial in this project because this theater-space is located in the everyday experiences of individuals, and thus requires the interpretive skills and descriptive vocabularies anthropologists have struggled with to grapple with others’ experiences. Using Turnerian terms (1986), we might ask a variety of questions: how does the neo-liberal drama exist in the background of informants’ experiences, and when and how does it emerge into the foreground? How do individuals come to recognize themselves as participants in this drama? How do they insert themselves into these plots, or how do they actively embrace a certain kind of power by allowing themselves to become the subjects of certain kinds of knowledge? When do they seize upon “empowering” discourses, and how do these discourses accomplish their simultaneous subjection?

But there is another necessary strategy, it seems to me, one that requires a very different analytic move. If understanding the theater space of neo-liberalism requires in depth analysis of the emplotment of subjectivities by liberal discourses, it also requires an equally rigorous examination of

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the historical factors that interrupt, deflect, and rewrite the performances of these psycho-social dramas. After all, post-socialist space in Eastern Europe is still dominated by monuments of many kinds that index the century-long struggle to develop socialist societies in the continent's poorer half; the stage can never be cleared of the props left behind by the actors in the old dramas. Therefore, it is too easy to interpret the decade's worth of markets and elections as *either* the imposition of colonial or neo-colonial power, *or* the reassertion of powerful patterns of thought and action from the socialist or feudal (Russian, Hapsburg, Ottoman) past.

Ethnographers are intellectually and methodologically equipped to take up a position at the place where these metanarratives intersect. What crosses there is the "reality" of post-socialism, and by integrating the analytic framework of governance into their work, ethnographers might develop compelling and effective representations of this crossing.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the organizers of the AAA conference for asking us to reflect on our work in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and particularly Sascha Goluboff, for pulling these articles and their comments together. The discussion of this paper at the Anthropology Department Workshop at the University of Minnesota was extremely useful in forcing me to clarify many points. I would especially like to thank Bruce Grant for his precise and invaluable comments on the earlier version of this talk/paper, which I tried, albeit not completely successfully, to incorporate into this draft.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term "governance" to encompass the meanings that Foucault gave to the term "governmentality." I do this because I want to adopt the opposite strategy that Foucault chose: he wanted to stress the particularity and difficulty of this perspective on society by employing a neologism, while I want to expand the familiar circle of meanings that can emerge from an everyday term like governance.

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