
NEW DIRECTIONS IN POSTSOCIALIST STUDIES

Melissa L. Caldwell
Harvard University

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The articles in this issue of *AEER* bring together a selection of the presentations given at the 2002 Annual Soyuz Symposium at the University of Michigan, on February 22-23, 2002. The Symposium's theme, "New Directions in Postsocialist Studies," inspired panelists, discussants, and members of the audience to reflect on current research topics, changing methodologies, and enduring questions in the rapidly changing field of postsocialist studies. The authors of the papers presented here engage with these themes by drawing on their research in field sites located throughout the postsocialist world, including a paper on Nicaragua. The inclusion of this paper further pushed participants to think critically about the analytical and ethnographic parameters of "postsocialism" as well as the extent of the Soviet sphere of influence. These articles are complemented by three additional articles that were submitted separately. Together, these Soyuz and non-Soyuz articles deal with such diverse topics as the invention and performance of tradition, migration, employment issues, discourses about the body and the person, identity negotiations, consumption, social relations, and the character of the postsocialist moment. Taken both collectively and comparatively, they offer insight into a set of themes that are

of concern not only to ethnographers of postsocialism, but also to anthropologists working in other areas of the world.

A common thread in the papers by Sascha Goluboff, Kristen Ghodsee, Armine Ishkanian, Jonathan Larson, and Pál Nyíri and Joana Breidenbach is the realm of work. Their papers raise questions about how citizens in postsocialist states understand and value different forms of labor; the nature of professionalism and vocation in changing labor markets; the choices that people make in finding "suitable" work; and how they present themselves and others as workers, citizens, and persons. A theme that links Armine Ishkanian's paper with those by Karen Kapusta-Pofahl, Ilka Thiessen, and Nita Luci is that of the position of women. Their papers point to concerns about women's efforts to make sense of and accommodate changes in the local, national, and global political and economic systems in which they live; their understandings of what it means to be a woman, feminine, or feminist in today's social world; the extent to which women are social agents or objectified subjects; and how women mediate their relationships with other women, members of their family, men, and the state. Issues of identity and categories of personhood also emerge in the papers by

Jonathan Larson and Pál Nyíri and Joana Breidenbach; while Bradley Tatar, Nita Luci, and Ilka Thiessen share similar interests in locating identity discourses in the physical bodies of individuals. Another related set of themes that emerges most vividly in the papers by Jennifer Cash, Tristra Newyear, Andrei Vinogradov, and Anna Sokolina is that of the link between identity and local cultural forms. In particular, these authors address questions about the processes by which cultural practices and artifacts are created, contested, and naturalized as indigenous products with local and “traditional” significance; who possesses the “expert knowledge” that creates these traditions and determines their validity; and the ways in which these traditions are commodified for both internal and external consumption.

The articles begin with Sascha Goluboff’s incisive discussant’s comments from the Soyuz symposium. Drawing from her own fieldwork in the Moscow Choral Synagogue, Goluboff uses the metaphor of prostitution to link the papers by Ishkanian and Ghodsee and to introduce a discussion about the literal and symbolic dangers and opportunities presented by labor migration from East to West. She suggests that the metaphor of prostitution offers a space for thinking about the responsibilities and obligations that link migrants with their families and homelands.

In her article, Kristen Ghodsee explores the discursive construction and contestation of migration trends in Southeastern Europe. Drawing from her research on the phenomenon of “brain drain” of educated and skilled Bulgarians to the West, Ghodsee suggests that discourses about migration divert attention from more pressing

concerns with fertility and demographic decline.

Armine Ishkanian also considers public and personal discourses about labor migration by focusing on the experiences of Armenian female labor migrants. By considering Armenians’ moral categories of appropriate female behavior and responsibility, as well as the practical aspect of labor migration as a survival strategy, Ishkanian argues that Armenian female labor migrants have become the vehicles through which issues of economic globalization and the Armenian experience with postsocialism are articulated.

Bradley Tatar examines Nicaragua’s shift from socialist partner of the Soviet Union to capitalist ally of the United States of America. Tatar argues that it is through religious discourses about the body that Nicaraguans navigate these larger political and economic transformations and provide cultural legitimation for the capitalist political order.

In his article, Jonathan Larson describes a workshop on curriculum vitae writing that he attended in Slovakia. Through an analysis of the linguistic genres of representation that participants learned in this workshop, Larson argues that practices of self-definition and self-identification illuminate how new notions of personhood, and particularly national persons, are articulated.

Pál Nyíri and Joana Breidenbach present material from their ethnographic study of a group of Soviet physicists. By exploring the social world inhabited by Soviet scientists who engaged in cutting-edge research at a time of intellectual decline in other disciplines, Nyíri and Breidenbach argue that these

researchers' choice of physics as a profession was influenced by the belief that physics offered an acceptable living and an officially sanctioned exemption from ideological make-believe.

Ilka Thiessen takes up the issue of personhood through a study of the bodily discourses that young female engineers in Macedonia invoked during the period of the Yugoslav conflict. Through an ethnographic case study of a body sculpting salon in Skopje, Thiessen suggests that these young women contest the ways they are presented in the Western media through the physical management of their bodies.

The theme of gendered selves and experiences continues in Karen Kapusta-Pofahl's article, which addresses how members of a Czech women's organization rework the concept of "feminism" as a reaction to foreign (primarily Western) discourses about feminism. Kapusta-Pofahl suggests that it is through these negotiations that the members of this organization assert both the uniqueness of their experiences and their equality to Western feminists.

In her article, Nita Luci investigates sexual violence in Kosovo and suggests that violent acts such as rape are embedded within a larger system of political discourses that create gendered and ethnic subjects. Luci argues that as forms of violence and domination become embodied by both men and women, they become aspects of daily practice.

Jennifer Cash draws from her fieldwork on children's folkloric groups in the Republic of Moldova to analyze the values and meanings that are conveyed through performances by folkloric ensembles. By examining the

criteria that jurors identify and use when judging at folklore festivals, Cash suggests that debates over authenticity and aesthetics reveal Moldovans' efforts to distance themselves from a Soviet identity and past by creating a set of Moldovan traditions.

Anna Sokolina continues the discussion of the visual representations through which identities are articulated by examining changes in Russian architectural trends. Through a description of recent changes in Moscow architecture, Sokolina argues that a critical understanding of the physical topography of postsocialist society offers insight into the social and political lives of Russian citizens.

In her article, Tristra Newyear develops the topic of the commodification of cultural symbols through a biography of a Buriat instrument maker. Newyear suggests that it was through his eclectic career history that this artisan was able simultaneously to appropriate and criticize Soviet ideals and standards for folk culture; at the same time, this artisan has contributed to new formations of musical culture in post-Soviet non-Russian communities.

Andrei Vinogradov also raises questions about the revival of "traditional" practices by examining shamanism in Southern Siberia. Through a description of different forms of shamanism in this region, Vinogradov identifies three sets of distinctive identities and their corresponding practices.

Finally, these last three articles, while not part of the Soyuz Symposium, nevertheless complement the preceding papers. In his article, Gerald Creed turns to the topic of consumption and presents

an alternative reading of consumer practices. Through a critical interrogation of how Bulgarians consume “in the breach” when they are faced by practical concerns with everyday survival that take precedence over the purchase of consumer goods, Creed suggests a rethinking of analytical configurations of socialist and capitalist economic practices.

Andrei Simić pursues another line of analytical critique through an investigation of ethno-nationalism among South Slavs. By considering the phenomenon of Western popular culture in Yugoslavia, Simić criticizes prevailing ideologies of nationalism and Marxism and offers possibilities for a new way of understanding these processes.

In the last article, Petteri Laihonen explores the issue of preferential treatment given to Hungarians living in other countries and the complications these practices have generated in Hungary’s relations with Romania and Slovakia. Laihonen argues that attention to these dynamics will inform current discussions about the problems inherent to definitions of nation and citizen in Europe more generally.