

---

## DISCUSSION OF WHY POST-SOCIALISM IS GOOD TO THINK, PART I

*Nancy Ries*  
*Colgate University*

---

As post-socialist polities careen along in the often jarring throes of transformation, ethnographers witness (alongside “their” people) various forms of power, capital and meaning emerging, competing, and retracting in a complex, almost organic dance.<sup>1</sup> Some of these forms seem altogether new and unexpected – so we see a novel “mode of production” emerge in the Ukraine, a whole bureaucracy and social practice organized around Chernobyl suffering (Petryna). Some forms seem like revitalizations of the old – as in a resurfacing of indigenous legal systems in Abkhazia (Garb). Some forms seem to be desperate attempts to sustain or call back the structures and comforts of the recent past as in the Russian village (Miller). Some strike us as moving in contrary ways at once, progressively and regressively, as in the pluralist essentializing of identity in Istria (Ballinger). Tracking such post-socialist phenomena, ethnographers provide compelling cases for anthropology – cases where people and institutions and states are conjoined in both struggle and mutual accommodation – and all this in a context of massive regional and global shifts.

Pam Ballinger presents for us the paradox of “authentic hybridity” wherein a hybrid identity makes itself into a new *essence*. Her work reveals the process by which identity forms around a kernel of place or history – she gives a close and disturbing view of the dynamic discursive and practical ways this occurs. This case reminds us of how Sarayevan became an authentic identity during the siege of that city (and reminds us of how fervently some would fight for that hybridity).

The Istrian case seems to reveal a set of intercultural “kinship” logics – with rules about which cultures can marry each other and which cannot (both literally and metaphorically) – and we see here a constrained exogamy in which “cultural marriage” seems to be OK between autochthonous (Istrian) Italians, Croats, and Slovenes (who are cast as European) but is NOT recognized between Istrians and Kosovar Albanians or Bosnian refugees (of whatever identity) who are cast as Orientals or Balkans.

Of course any *national* identity is the product of multiple phases of hybridizing through economic and cultural exchanges, intermarriage, etc. *Anything* national is actually a hybrid of hybridized hybrids no matter how strongly it insists on its essence. Ballinger calls hybridity and purity two sides of one coin but aren’t they rather different phases in the same process (not necessarily a linear one)?

“Whiteness” is a good example of a similar hybrid essentialized in complex and multiple ways in the United States – and this is an example of an extremely powerful and self-protective hybrid which is often constituted as some kind of purity. An intriguing question is: what are the different effects of hegemonically and hierarchically enforced or enhanced “pure hybrids” and ones emergent locally and more spontaneously? What are the conditions that produce hybridizing and its authentication? Ballinger’s work in the end spurs us to reexamine the false “purity” of the mega-hybrids - those Frankenstein hegemonies such as Capitalist and Communist or East and West - that seem to reach out to devour the whole world in their huge and violent membership drives.

Paula Garb gives us a picture of a mousetrap in which a LOT is going on. The Abkhaz people seem plagued by and trapped by nation states, indeed by the very notion of nations. Garb characterizes the battle that is going on here as one between modern and pre-modern forms; for heuristic purposes we could consider this through a Weberian lens, as a battle between, on the one hand, rationalizing/bureaucratizing forces and forms of practice, which may also be nationalizing and globalizing, and, on the other hand, contextualizing/localizing forces and forms of practice. In other words, in the arena of law (and probably in many other arenas as well) representatives of the

---

state and representatives of the populace confront each other in a battle over the forms that legal practice will take. Will legal decision-making and conflict resolution be generalized and institutionalized, stripped of everything “irrelevant” – i.e. everything aesthetic, familial, cultural, personal, honorific, economic, religious – or can juridical practices remain situated in their local, historical and meaningful contexts? Garb cites an informant highly placed in the Abkhaz government as saying, “if the state cannot protect you, you have to protect yourself,” but in a sense what she observes are local people and communities protecting themselves from the state in the process of protecting themselves from each other.

What seems striking to me in the history of these conflicts over legal forms is that the continuity of indigenous practice always seems to be a slap in the face of both colonial and post-colonial state formations. Law is one of the central and most forceful ways that states assert their power, both in a pragmatic and in a symbolic sense. What better way to express the power of local practice (which is the power of the old, the tried and true, the holistic, the culturally contextualized) than by sustaining its force and meaningfulness against successive incursions by elite powers of state?

Garb notes that “it is not always clear whether we are witnessing a society regressing from the modern or soaring toward the modern and the post-modern” and suggests the possibility of a “third trajectory.” Generally, we are so stuck in our notions of linear time (in which one can move forward or backward but not in some other dimension or direction)... that we can’t see this. How do people in Abkhazia construe time? In their new volume, *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Changes in the Postsocialist World* (Rowman and Littlefield 1999), Burawoy and Verdery point out that post-socialist revolutions are always both regressive and progressive (p. 15). This is true, but we need even other models of societal dynamics and temporal vectors. The anthropology of post-socialism throws this necessity into stark relief, since the logic of the sequencing of past, present, and future is often belied by both practices and local theory, on many levels at once. In the mousetrap involutions of Abkhazia, pre-Soviet, Soviet, post-Soviet and extra-Soviet systems of power and meaning confront each other in the practicing of law, and in this context we see macro and micro, bureaucratic and charismatic, past, present and future alternately collide and intermingle.

By exploring the “social formations that have organized around the Chernobyl unknown” Adriana Petryna gives us an extraordinary glimpse at the processes through which practices produce structures. Initially, the economy of suffering in Ukraine was brought about by catastrophes of unprecedented magnitude: Chernobyl and the collapse of the socialist welfare state. But as Petryna shows, local responses to these events themselves produced or reproduced whole structures and systems: bureaucracies and social institutions small and large, markets for information, medication and classification; ultimately they produced and legitimized not only a whole state but also a framework of international pharmaceutical and biotech providers, specializing in Post-Chernobyl suffering in all of its profitable vagueness. Here, too, we can see so clearly how monetary inflation leads to inflation in other domains – discursive, symbolic, bureaucratic, political. International experts would see this as hysteria, I’m sure, but in fact this irrational economy of suffering is most logical! Market uncertainty finds expression in medicalized discourses of uncertainty, as powerful and generative as they are vague.

I can’t help but wonder what kind of symbolic polity is being produced in all of this. Will Ukraine of the future be a pharmatopia of medical ritual built around biotech temples staffed by a hierarchy of sufferers? Here, we can see how micro level practices generate institutions of a particular kind.

Liesl Gambold Miller’s paper presents an interesting contrast to Petryna’s. In Ukraine, people deprived of the services of the old state in effect reach up with their claims of suffering and manage to generate a new state – in part of course, because of international inputs. In the Russian

---

village Miller depicts, however, the people's voices and complaints seem to resonate nowhere. Miller argues that frustration with the collapse of a social safety net is a barrier to reform but that this is invisible from the standpoint of international institutions and theories. The starkness of transition is plainly visible in the village: schools, libraries, cultural centers have closed, daycare has ended, social services and activities of all kinds have vanished, unemployment is up several hundred percent, the employed are not paid, health measures are down, the birth rate is declining, people are leaving. As Miller's informant Lida puts it "now we work harder and have less."

These people are suffering from many of the things which plague Ukrainians – so why are their complaints unheard, their losses invisible? Why do their calls for the return of a state not resonate, why does their practice of suffering seem to produce no answering structure? In the introduction to *Uncertain Transition*, Burawoy and Verdery write: "Our view of the relation between macro structures and everyday practices is that the collapse of party states and administered economies broke down macro structures, thereby creating space for micro worlds to produce autonomous effects that may have unexpected influence over the structures that have been emerging" (1999:2). Why, in the case of the Russian village of Moshkinskoe, in the affluent Nizhny Novgorod region, do the practices of micro worlds seem to produce so *few* autonomous effects on structure?

One possible answer to this question is that we see in post-socialism the paradoxical remains of a state that was intimately involved in the lives of all its citizens and yet at the same time, in crucial ways or places, utterly absent. What has happened in many rural regions especially is that the paternal state has retracted, leaving the *space* for local subsistence where it always was. What is notable in Miller's description is the sense of a void or vacuum left in the retraction of the state.

Post-socialism reveals in stark and often painful ways the wrenching motions of the advancing or retracting of institutions of statehood and the concomitant practices among citizens of reaching out towards or retreating from their states, through various and often simultaneous expressions of identification and attachment or dissociation and severing. All of these contractions and expansions are, in the end, both the product and the process of imbricated practices of labor both material and symbolic. They represent the fundamental vivid working out of relations, institutions, and ideologies in a context of all sorts of meanings and new and hybrid forms of capital.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper includes Nancy Ries' comments on two papers presented at the panel that were not submitted to this special issue: Adriana M. Petryna's "Biological Citizenship in Contemporary Ukraine" and Pamela L. Ballinger's "Hybridity and Borderlands Reconsidered."

---