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

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The watershed events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe over the last ten years have, to be sure, dramatically altered the expectations and practices of anthropologists inside and outside the formerly socialist world. The articles at hand, first presented as papers at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Chicago in 1999, illustrate these new dynamics well. Where anxiety and instability reign in the lives of many of the peoples we encounter in our work, the essays underline how the same uncertainty also provokes important questions about our own epistemic boundaries and new end-goals for cultural politics.

Let me begin by addressing several issues that speak to these articles as a group. The most important comes in asking how we can best define postsocialism. Is it simply a historically grounded series of events that broadly share in other dramatic forms of everyday upheavals around the world? Or do we press it further, thinking anthropologically, as a cosmological complex that is fundamentally different from what we have known in the modern period? While each of these articles stresses the drama of the sociopolitical changes of the last decade, producing a world of uncertain transitions, contingencies and the maw of being thrust once again into new social experiments, the essays lean mostly to the historicist line, leaving the larger project of moving beyond our area commonalities into distinctive theoretical ground for later consideration.

Along the way, this obliges us to interrogate, as many of the papers here do, the kinds of terms we draw on in our own lives – Enlightenment, secular humanism, cosmopolitanism, the nation-state, the welfare state, citizenship -- to see how they have become configured differently, or not, in socialist and post-socialist spaces. For example, we find many references here to the idea of cultural identity. But does a word that comes from the Latin root -idem, meaning sameness, and therefore asserts homogeneity across a broad terrain of persons, truly aid us in marking the kinds of internal differentiations within groups, those that signal the best ethnography?

It is in this respect that what we don't find in these short essays at hand - a sustained dialogue with the work of our colleagues from across the formerly socialist world -- suggests the kind of further work that lies ahead for all of us. Scores of research institutes abroad have been writing on issues of indigenism, citizenship, anti-Semitism, civil society, and governance for decades. Unless we can engage these theoretical and methodological approaches as fluently as we do our own (and who, after all, will do this if not scholars?), we risk misunderstanding the very platforms on which so much of the local knowledge we seek is grounded.

Petra Rethmann's essay reintroduces the famous double bind of the liberal nation-state, where the failure of a federal government to extend rights and obligations equally across its entire citizenry is painfully felt by so many. Rethmann inventively draws on the language of the Russian constitution, remarking on how constitutional rights come to be seen by state planners almost as possessions, imagined objects which define access to privilege. What then, Rethmann asks, after Charles Taylor, does the Russian government actually recognize in Koriak lives, besides their structural degradation, high rates of illness and low levels of education? In offering us a new rendition of "cultural citizenship," Rethmann reaches synthetically to a political ground where relational identities among Koriaks, which include animals, humans and the land as mutually interactive, assert a basis for lands claims. We then want to ask about the kinds of details normally outside the purview of these shorter essays: What are the specific arguments various Koriaks make that situate their perception of humanity/land/the animal world in contrast to Slavic culture? How might these perceptions be configured differently by women, for example, rather than men, as

Elizabeth Povinelli demonstrated for aboriginal land claims cases in northwestern Australia, where women's perceived access to "myth" vs. the men's association with "history" was pivotal in indigenous arguments about the existence of a "sentient landscape" (1993). How have relatively privileged indigenous elites – those educated in metropolitan capitals, or the former Native Affairs officers of the Soviet period -- reinvented themselves through the language of the Soviet collective, as Aleksandr Pika documented across Siberia (1994)? These kinds of internal differentiations take us not just toward a vision of Russians and Koriaks as "two sovereign subjects," but as a series of diverse local actors driven by local strategies and constrained by history.

Sascha Goluboff's essay on a fellowship of blind Russian Jews in Moscow asks similar questions of a famously minoritized population in Russian history. Like Rethmann, Goluboff turns to "cultural citizenship," this time following Homi Bhaba, to investigate how elderly, impoverished men and women argue for their "*russkost*'" (Russianness) along cultural rather than perceived racial lines. She documents how this allowed Russian Jews to find a firmer sense of belonging, enabling themselves as "true citizens" of the new Russia. Here again we want to ask whether this "true" belonging is every fully possible in a nation-state framework that emphasizes homogeneity of experience in a world where homogeneity is very far from the norm. Roger Brubaker has perhaps most actively explored this in his readings of constitutions of the late Soviet period (1994). Bhabha himself calls for a "politics of moderation," not so much a resolution or synthesis of competing claims between a federal state and a local minority, but for a recognition of ambivalence, where federal and local allegiances are only two of the many contours of self definition (1997). Without this emphasis on plurality of allegiances, we risk reproducing the often unrealistic binary portraits our informants offer us (often out of their own generosity, that we might understand complex situations more easily). It is tempting surely to see the Russian Jews of this essay in the same fashion as the fellowship they built, a "Society of Friends and Like-Minded People" (*Obshchestvo Druzei and Edinomyshlennikov*). But we would be remiss not to press the question of internal differentiation further. How many took part in the activities of the Jewish diaspora, before or after *perestroika*? How many took on different roles at work or in competing Soviet social institutions in earlier years? In what ways have politically Soviet or religiously Judaic ideologies informed their expectations for government responsibility and the concept of the collective?

Julie Hemment captures much of this ambiguity in her creative essay on new NGOs and inherited post-Soviet conceptions of statehood. She finds, unexpectedly, that actors in the new Russia's non-governmental organizations have their eyes turned almost exclusively to governments for endorsement and guidance. She then interrogates what the concept of "state" means in the post-Soviet NGO industry, dominated so notably by women from a wide range of government and scholarly backgrounds. Interestingly, the concept of the "third sector" emerges here homologously to the kinds of synthetic strategies to bridge the gap between "state" and "society" explored in the papers between Rethmann and Goluboff. Hemment in turn evokes the kind of work done by Michael Taussig on secrecy by asking how new NGOs enact this kind of "public secret" (1992). In the conclusions she writes that, "the foundation functions as a kind of invisible and precarious fourth leg, propping up the third sector model but writing out its own existence." This closing statement begs the same kinds of questions Taussig himself asked in his work on state fetishism. Who specifically benefits from this public secret of the state's presence in the work of NGOs? Who would have a vested interest in the use of NGOs as a masking device for power still held exclusively in state hands? Or, in what Hemment describes as the foundations' espousal of an "idealized fantasy relationship with the state," how might this be different from concepts of civil society seen across the Russian 20th century, when the concept of *grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* passed in almost a structurally seamless way from a tsarist vanguard of the elites to a Bolshevik vanguard of the intelligentsia (Stepanov 1997)?

Tom Wolfe's article paints many of these questions broadly by advocating the reinterpretation of political goals and anthropological strategies in post-Soviet space. Today's almost unlimited access to long restricted field sites means that, "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." Wolfe begins productively by returning to late 18th century western notions of a "liberal problem-space," by taking a number of concepts often seen as self-evident in much of modern politics – the autonomy of the volitional individual agent, an anthropomorphized body politic (Dumont 1970), the notion of rights and liberties as possessions, and finally the rise of the welfare state as guardian of security. Following Foucault, he raises the question of how private interests get prefigured by disciplinary discourses; one finds this most tellingly in the "subject effects" of Soviet legacies across the essays here. This emphasis on governance invites us to situate the work of the Soviet state across the now familiar matrix of culture/power/history, but the surprising turn comes in an embrace of theater as a template for anthropological thinking. Here we need to ask what the particular leverage is that the dramatic genre offers, particularly when so much of Cold-War inspired Kremlinology relied on highly repetitive Shakespearean models (Jebrailov 1991). If the turn is Turnerian, do we follow the genealogy of Max Gluckmann's emphasis on conflict in dramatic emplotments? Is there a use for returning to "onstage" and "backstage" spaces (Turner 1986), or is this a more generalized understanding of politics as performance? In what ways does a theatrical mode flexibly rely on archetypes without falling prey to prescribed interpretations (Lotman and Uspenskii 1984, Propp 1958)?

Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov's essay takes up the gambit of seeing governance as a form of "cognitive organization of the world" (Verdery 1996) via the work of Marilyn Strathern and Derrida. Through his field studies and archival work among Evenki reindeer herders of the Siberian taiga, Ssorin-Chaikov found that the "long 1917" of Soviet cultural construction curiously stretched whenever Evenki were concerned. "It was indeed a very long 1917," he writes, when the wife of a Russian official who had lived alongside Evenki since WWII queried him, "What Soviet power [among Evenki] are you talking about? Evenki didn't know any Soviet power until the early 1950s." Ssorin-Chaikov argues how the simple but "incorrigible" difference of Evenki from those in power (as we might also see with Koriaks, Russian Jews, and NGO workers) rendered them systematically at odds with expectations of state officials. Hence one finds a process of almost steady deferral, where difference itself is structurally marked by the always asymptotic striving toward "true" citizenship, "good" citizenship, or, what Johannes Fabian reminds us is a different kind of holy grail, coevalness (1983). What this suggests for a number of projects here is that rather than trying to aid our informants simply to conform to an ideal synthesis of state vs. local, we might begin instead by asking whether such "rational and poetic" state ambitions to implement even their own constitutions work on anything but paper. What are the ways we might ask questions differently by challenging the very terms set out by state planners? Ssorin-Chaikov's emphasis on the structural limitations of state-sponsored cultural projects plies again at what makes the subjects in the essays at hand "socialist" or "post-socialist." He closes by urging us to understand socialism not as a "thing in itself," but instead as an invention always pressing at its own boundaries, particularly toward its capitalist counterpart, to mark its own deferral of economic and political achievements. With this as our guide, the work of post-socialist states, awash in the murk of runaway economies and new political platforms, may be making many of the groups in these essays not less isolated but more, distanced and deferred even more actively than before by politicians ever more challenged to maintain a semblance of a rational and poetic plan. In the language of statecraft, Soviet and otherwise, it may be the case that for the struggles of indigenous Siberians, Russian Jews, NGO workers, and anthropologists, the long 1917 has just gotten longer.

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