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Doing fieldwork in Eastern Europe: introduction

By Michaela Schäuble (University of Tübingen) with the collaboration of Tomasz Rakowski (University of Warsaw) and Wlodzimierz Pessel (University of Warsaw)[1]

Anthropological research in the formerly socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe is still widely equated with witnessing change and reconfiguring the mental map of Europe. Since the late 1980s the *terra incognita* that lay behind the former Iron Curtain has become a Promised Land that 'created new opportunities both for established scholars and for a new generation of fieldworkers' (Hann 2002:2, see also Sideri this issue). However, many of the questions concerning the relationship between political change, socio-economic upheaval and cultural transformation following the collapse of socialism are left unanswered or have become obsolete during the past decade.

Globalisation and the ongoing integration in Europe go hand in hand with the ethno-national tensions, increasing disintegration, and various identity-fundamentalisms in the troubled peripheries of Europe. Throughout the post-socialist world such turbulent changes have generated strong emotions, as the initial hope and excitement were frequently followed by disappointment, anger, envy, or hopelessness. Yet these sentiments—or 'traumas of the Great Change' (Sztompka 2000 and 2004)—remain largely neglected in academic analyses of the profound legislative, administrative, economic, and macro-political transformations that occurred across Central and Eastern Europe.

Based on ethnographic case studies of communities in Poland, Romania, Hungary, Georgia, Serbia and Croatia, this collection of articles aims to illustrate the significance of imagination and emotion to post-socialist identity and their role within current political processes. In attempting to re-imagine post-socialism—not merely as a spatial and temporal entity but as a site of current anthropological debates—the contributors to this volume make new connections between history and memory, narrative and experience, past and present, and in doing so bring renewed focus to the role of individual initiative and creativity in defining and envisioning a new social order.

The rewriting of national historiographies and individual biographies is a major feature in the process of identity formation, and the majority of the countries considered in this journal issue actively define themselves in contrast to their recent history of socialism. For many, the question of whose experiences and knowledge will count as legitimate or form part of the 'official historiography' arises. Ethnographic micro-societal fieldwork creates new insight into the contemporary dilemmas and everyday practices of ordinary people dealing with the heritage of socialist ideology while simultaneously trying to obtain a sense of security and continuity in their identity.

For the contributors to this volume, the 'post-socialist condition' is not just a discursive construct, but part of their intellectual, cultural and personal identity. They have all experienced—directly or during fieldwork—the political changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and how the resulting social changes operate on different levels and at different 'paces'. One 'pace' concerns the step-by-step legislative, administrative, economic and macro-political transformations that proceeded before the enlargement of the EU in May 2004 and now proceed by way of technological, commercial and even academic adjustment. Another level is constituted by the absolute ground of these changes, the invisible spheres of local bias, micro-politics, and repertoires of local symbols and mythologies. This ground alters at its own— much slower—'pace'. Whereas the history of transformation in its formal, official shape consists of events that can be precisely dated and progresses in a linear order, the history of the second 'pace' rarely proceeds in an equally stringent manner. We are dealing here with the negotiation of meanings, cosmology, symbolic transactions, and 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997), where transitions are characterised by a peculiar 'delay'. This will be the focus of the following articles.

In her account 'Fieldwork made easier', Fran Deans deals with the characteristic 'vacuum' that social and economic changes in formerly socialist societies have created for ethnic minorities. Having conducted fieldwork in a Romany community in rural Eastern Hungary, she was confronted with the increasing marginalisation and declining living standards of the Roma population, primarily caused by the annihilation of prior socialist integration programmes. The 'vacuum' caused by the state's withdrawal from welfare issues is currently being filled by an enormous expansion of the Hungarian civil society sector. A variety of non-governmental initiatives and organisations (NGOs) have implemented community development programmes aimed to provide support and services that differ considerably from the old regime. The socialist state legacy of record keeping, meticulous administration, and monitoring of Roma integration, however, proved a valuable source of data that provided the anthropologist with the necessary information to track recent changes and to understand local strategies of dealing with the new social context.

Also focusing on the difficulties caused by the shift from a planned economy to the market, Anna Malewska in her 'Market view of the Polish political scene' records the disillusionment and sarcasm of small-scale entrepreneurs in the Tatra Highlands. In contemporary political discourse she detects an attitude towards the new legal framework that—contrary to Max Weber's notion of politics and authority in a rational state—is not grounded in acceptance of the rule of law and its agents, but rather based on mistrust. Anna Malewska's article can be read as the Polish counterpart to Giordano and Kostova's (2002) earlier analysis of 'The social production of mistrust' in Bulgaria,. and provides a valuable insight into everyday political discourses 'from below'.

Another important aspect of contemporary anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe is elaborated in the works of Tomasz Rakowski and Wlodzimierz Pessel. Tomasz Rakowski conducted fieldwork amongst 'scrap and junk gatherers' living close to a lignite mine in Central Poland. As he followed the gatherers, collecting waste materials and detecting 'hidden knowledge', he himself came across astonishing strategies of gaining access to usually hidden worlds. The search for scrap on mine premises is not only a means of economic survival for his interlocutors, but establishes a daily practice of imagined relations between underprivileged workers and prestigious and powerful enterprises.

Wlodzimierz Pessel focuses on waste, consumption, and systems of recycling in present-day Poland. He employs the category of 'garbeology', which allows him to draw conclusions concerning a particular Polish cosmology based on notions of cleanliness and dirt. In his anthropological research of rubbish bins in the streets of Warsaw he approximates otherwise 'unapproachable layers' of everyday consumer culture in a post-socialist setting.

When dealing with identity formation in times of transition, such 'unapproachable layers' may also serve as an allegory for different stratums of memory. In the course of the present hype on the topic of 'social memory', a lot has been written about the correlation between history/historiography on the one hand and memory/recollection on the other. The continual conflicts over the truth of history and their influence on national as well as regional identities are particularly vital to researchers who work within the former Yugoslavia. Confronted with the aftermath of war and fresh traces of collective trauma, social scientists cannot simply account for 'historical facts', but need to take the emotional and imaginative engagement of their interlocutors into consideration.

In his cultural-hermeneutical appraisal of 'Myth, collective trauma and war in Serbia', the sociologist Daniel Šuber describes how mythologies and mythical narratives were revitalised and became crucial for imagining a communal Serbian identity during Milosevic's regime. Dating as far back as 1389, the legendary Battle of Kosovo provides the mythological framework that informs and reshapes contemporary notions of Serbian (self)-victimisation and martyrdom. Drawing on concepts such as 'cultural trauma' and 'cultural fear', Šuber argues that a blurring of the distance between past and present provides a fertile seedbed for ultra-nationalist politics and might help to explain current Anti-European sentiments.

I came across the same mutually dependent dichotomies of (self-)victimisation and heroism during my own fieldwork in neighbouring Croatia. In my article below, I decipher the symbolism of a seemingly harmless carnival performance. One of my core informants, an ex-combatant in the third Balkan wars (1991-1995) who now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dressed up as an 'Arab suicide bomber' and playfully threatened to launch a terrorist attack on 'the West'. I develop the concept of 'imagined suicide' as a category of ironic commentary on global terrorism, and simultaneously employ it to interpret highly coded yet emblematic expressions of individual discontent in a post-war setting.

Researchers in Central and Eastern Europe are confronted with a sense of 'history happening here and now.' The socio-political transformations that have now been going on for more than 15 years have had tremendous impacts on personal memory and micro-histories. In her paper Eleni Sideri reflects on the peculiarity of her 'post-socialist fieldwork experience' in Georgia. Starting with her first personal encounter with migrants from various areas of the former Soviet Union in her native Greece in 1991, she notices that in early migration discourses migration was labelled the return of the 'brother Greeks' or 'the Argonauts'. A continuity from ancient history and mythology prevailed whereas modern political traumas were silenced. During her own fieldwork in Georgia she came to realise the parallels between Greece's ambivalent position at the margins of Europe and her post-socialist field. She is made an 'oriental/eastern subject' by her Georgian informants, eventually resulting in her reassessment of personal (Greek/Georgian) 'Cold War experience' and the respective notions of 'East' and 'West.' Looking both ways, her analysis of philosophical and

anthropological concepts of 'space' and 'post-Cold war reality' leads her to question the concept of 'Eastern Europe' altogether. In accordance with this she urges us to step beyond the current boundaries within the anthropological discipline in order to challenge (old and new) political and geographical divisions.

In her paper 'Post-socialist disclosures: an imperfect translation of personal experience into ethnographic writing', Madalina Florescu illustrates the powerful and long-lasting presence of Cold War experience. Taking her persona as 'an aphasic post-socialist subject' with 'no native tongue' and a 'disordered personality', and the death of her maternal grandmother as a starting point, she manufactures the topography of her personal post-socialist world. Her imagined origins are made up of distant voices during phone calls and blurred images of past memories. In a very sensual way she recollects smells and tastes of her childhood in Bucharest and connects them with sensations of fear and alienation during the odyssey of her migration. Ghosts, un-dead and dreams accompany her on her journey, during which she is simultaneously trying to develop a 'sense of history'. In her text Florescu traces the hidden transcripts and invisible realms of the space between the imagined and the real, between her sense of self and sense of exile. By skilfully combining theoretical concepts, anthropological observations and personal recollections, she develops a unique style of looking at and writing about the world.

A topic that should not be neglected in this journal issue is the visual or aesthetic dimension of representing social experience in post-socialist societies. Visual anthropologists keep reminding us that we gain much of our knowledge through vision and the senses, and that 'there are moments when the social world seems more evident in an object or a gesture than in the whole concatenation of our beliefs and institutions' (MacDougall 2006:94). The anthropological study of the social environment or the settings of a particular community require the researcher's sensitivity to the aesthetics and symbolic expression of social life. And although there is surely no such thing as one common 'post-socialist aesthetic', the recognition of certain visual structures may serve as a unifying experience among researchers of various countries in the former Eastern bloc.

In 'Filming ethnicity in Southern Transylvania', Anne Schiltz describes her experiences while making an ethnographic documentary film that explores issues of ethnic and cultural identity amongst a community of Transylvanian Saxons, a German-speaking minority in South-western Romania. She visually engages with 'the everyday ways in which members of a minority group in a multi-ethnic society craft their place and manifest a feeling of belonging', after a large part of the community migrated to Germany in the early 1990s. With her camera Schiltz searches for the material presence of abstract concepts such as ethnicity, work ethics, and the perception of time and change—and thus discovers that images have the capacity to become reflections of thought (MacDougall 1995:119). By taking the aesthetic dimensions of social reality into consideration, the anthropological observer might gain access to layers of embodied knowledge and experience that are otherwise difficult to grasp.

Anthropologists cannot escape from the commonplace (Kõresaar 2003) and the authors of these papers all refer to individual and embodied experiences of everyday life. In fact, tackling everyday realities seems to be the most emblematic feature of anthropological research in post-socialist scenarios, insofar as it provides a valuable counterpart to 'apparent history' as featured in legal acts, political programmes, and

changes of economic and monetary systems. In his influential *Anthropology*, Michael Herzfeld notes that anthropology and history 'have danced a flirtatious *pas de deux* throughout the past century' (Herzfeld 2001:55). In Central and Eastern Europe this flirtation has turned into a productive intellectual relationship, in that the authors' anthropological micro-scale fieldwork brings hitherto unseen or neglected levels, 'paces', and cultural narratives (back) into sight.

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