

Goodbye, Postsocialism!

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MARTIN MÜLLER

Abstract

This article assesses the trajectory of postsocialism as a concept and mounts a fivefold critique of postsocialism as: referring to a vanishing object; emphasising rupture over continuity; falling into a territorial trap; issuing from orientalisng knowledge construction; and constraining political futures. This critique serves to sketch the contours of an alternative project that still recognises difference but foregrounds links and continuities, develops a political edge, and theorises not just about but with and from this part of the world.

EAST BERLIN IN 1989. A SINGLE MOTHER OF TWO AND FERVENT SOCIALIST falls into a coma just before the Berlin Wall comes down. When she wakes up again, Germany has been reunified and the socialist regime toppled. But because her condition is so unstable, her family decide not to confront her with the truth. Instead, they start to enact a charade that keeps up the semblance that socialism is still alive.

The plot of *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003), a poignant film about the force and demise of socialism as a regime, could equally well be a parable for the concept that described what came after: postsocialism. Socialism, the regime, and postsocialism, the concept, both started with the expectation of epochal change, lost touch with people's lives on the ground, disappointed the emancipatory hopes attached to them and then kept on going as though nothing had happened, because no alternative was in sight.

When the socialist regimes collapsed in sequence between 1989 and 1992, it took the world by surprise. Observers had diagnosed the malaise of socialist economies since at least the 1970s, but few had expected an imminent implosion in quick succession (Kotkin 2008, pp. 4–5; Leon 2011). Uncertainty reigned as to what would follow in the wake of socialism. Would market reforms bring about capitalism triumphant, in a further expansion of global neoliberalism? That is certainly what Gayatri Spivak saw in the 1990s when she wrote in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that 'today in the post-Soviet world, privatization is the

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kingpin of economic restructuring for globalisation ... a new attempt to impose unification on the world by and through the “market” (Spivak 1999, p. 356). Would the communists perhaps win some countries back? In several cases they did, at least for a while. How would the hundreds of millions of people in postsocialist countries adjust to the new realities? How would they cope with a collapsing economy and a newly won freedom? Would democracy and capitalism take hold and, if so, what would they look like?

Out of this uncertainty of what the future would hold for people in ex-socialist countries, the term ‘postsocialism’ was born—from a moment of improvisation in an underdetermined situation. In the immediate aftermath of the socialist breakup, there was excitement around postsocialism and the opening it signified. ‘Everything we know is up for grabs’, wrote Katherine Verdery, ‘and “what comes next” is anyone’s guess’ (Verdery 1996, p. 38). With the momentous collapse of socialism, postsocialism seemed poised to leave a lasting intellectual imprint in the social sciences and humanities, perhaps akin to that of postcolonialism. As such, scholars regarded it as a global condition, not just constrained to the former socialist countries: ‘we are ... all postcommunists now’ (Sakwa 1999, p. 3) was the rallying cry.

As it turned out, the epochal implosion of the socialist regimes did not spawn an equally epochal intellectual revolution. There was a spike of interest in all things postsocialist in the 1990s and early 2000s, both by social theorists at large (Fukuyama 1992; Jameson 1994; Fraser 1997; Spivak 1999; Žižek 2001) and by specialists of the region (Verdery 1996; Stark & Bruszt 1998; Burawoy & Verdery 1999; Sakwa 1999; Hann 2001). However, the intellectual project soon began to run out of steam. Postsocialism has not left a lasting imprint on global social and cultural theory (Suchland 2011a). Where postcolonialism has become a staple of course syllabi across the humanities and social sciences, postsocialism remains at the margins and usually attached to regional specialisations. The term soldiers on as a widely used descriptive moniker for societies after socialism, but has been ‘worn thin from unreflective [sic] overuse’, as Donahoe and Habeck (2011, p. ix) are not alone in lamenting. Hann dismissed its conceptual value *tout court*: ‘the term has brought no theoretical advance’ (Hann 2006, p. 5). It is scholars from postsocialist societies in particular who have raised their voices to interrogate a term that they had little agency in shaping (Červinková 2012; Makovicky 2014a; Horvat & Štiks 2015; Chelcea & Druță 2016; Tlostanova 2017; Gentile 2018).

Just as *Goodbye, Lenin!* bade farewell to socialism, this article suggests bidding farewell to postsocialism and starting to think about what should come next. It argues that postsocialism, as a concept, has both lost its object and comes with problematic conceptual and political implications. Not only has postsocialism emerged from a particular historical conjuncture as a limited historical moment that has, over time, dissipated, as socialism has receded into the past. Perhaps more significantly, as this article will show, postsocialism comes with a particular epistemological, geographical and political vision that restricts what can (and cannot) be thought under that label and in what way. To put the critique in one sentence, notwithstanding the inevitable reduction that such condensation entails: facing the past, postsocialism emphasises rupture over continuity, privileges a territorial geographical imagination and reflects uneven power relationships in knowledge production. The aim of this article is to develop, *via* critique of postsocialism as a concept, an idea of what an alternative project might look like, not so much as a replacement for or successor to postsocialism, if that means occupying the same space, but as a transformation that creates a new thinking space.

What was postsocialism?

It is hard to overestimate the political and social consequences of the breakup of socialist regimes between 1989 and 1992. Then President of the Czech Republic Václav Havel captured the significance of the moment in a historical analogy: ‘the fall of the communist empire is an event on the same scale of historical importance as the fall of the Roman empire’ (Havel 1993, p. 10). Vladimir Putin, speaking from the imperial core rather than the periphery, bemoaned rather than celebrated that fall: ‘the destruction of the Soviet Union was ... the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people this was a true drama’ (Putin 2005). Not only did that collapse produce a new world order, erasing the East–West antagonism and the imminent threat of a thermonuclear war that had defined the Cold War, it also brought about a radical rupture in people’s everyday lives, as it precipitated the collapse of whole economies.

For some, the sudden end of socialism heralded a wider sense that the world was moving towards less ideological politics, where the confrontation of antagonistic regimes would be replaced by the more fluid pick-and-mix attitude of postmodernism (Fukuyama 1992; Sakwa 1999). While conflict was far from over, it would, as Huntington (1996) predicted, occur on the level of cultures rather than that of opposing political regimes. New social movements placed identities and rights, not social class, at the centre of attention. The spread of consumerism in the former Eastern Bloc turned attention away from high politics. It is for that reason that Holmes (2001) termed the long postcommunist decade between 9 November 1989 and 11 September 2001 the ‘heyday of happy globalisation’: according to him, all enemies were gone, all borders razed and all could participate in the new wealth—a diagnosis that generously ignored, of course, the wars of the Yugoslav breakup and in Chechnya.

The socialist collapse owed its monumentality to both its suddenness and its thoroughness. Although the *perestroika* reforms of the mid-1980s had revealed economic problems, few would have expected to see the entire Soviet Union dissolve only about five years later. The socialist regimes of Eastern Europe fell apart in the same historical impetus, with the result that, ultimately, 30 countries and more than 400 million people entered the postsocialist condition almost at the same time.¹

The collapse of socialism presented not only a formidable political and economic challenge but also an intellectual one:

It is not just political identities, including our own, that we will have the task of bounding and naming ... it is also the entire conceptual arsenal through which Western institutions and social science disciplines have been defined in this century. As one reads scholarship on the postsocialist processes of ‘privatization’, the creation of ‘property rights’, the development of ‘democracy’ or ‘civil society’ ... profound confusion sets in. One begins to see that these terms do not label useful concepts: they are elements in a massive political and ideological upheaval that is by no means restricted to the ‘East’. (Verdery 1996, p. 38)

¹These are: the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia); the Yugoslav successor states (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Hercegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia); the (other) Balkan states (Romania, Bulgaria, Albania); the 15 successor states of the Soviet Union (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan); and Mongolia.

The challenge therefore lay in conceptualising not only the end of socialism, but also the new condition of the rest of the world. Did we perceive neoliberalism as triumphant (Spivak 1999)? Was the clash of ideologies over and thus the end of history indeed nigh (Fukuyama 1992)? Would the sudden death of socialism as a regime rock the boat of the Left (Fraser 1997)?

‘Postsocialism’ was an appropriately agnostic term to describe an ambiguous present and an uncertain future—not only in the postsocialist countries themselves but in the world more widely. It emerged in the immediate aftermath of the collapse as a provisional notion to make sense of what looked like an underdetermined situation that could evolve in many different directions. And it kept good company with other ‘post-’ paradigms popular at the time, such as postmodernism (Jameson 1991) and postcolonialism (Spivak 1990), that all signalled a sense of rupture and epochal change.

It is difficult to credit first use of the term postsocialism to one publication. ‘Postsocialist’ as an adjective started to appear as a descriptor in some publications at around the same time in 1990, sometimes in inverted commas indicating the provisional nature of the term, as in Kornai (1990). ‘Postsocialism’ as a noun came later. It seems to have first been used in the proceedings of a conference on market economies held in Kraków in December 1990; these proceedings, however, did not appear in print until 1993 (Hausner *et al.* 1993). The first book to carry postsocialism in its title did not appear until 1997 (Grabher & Stark 1997). These early publications used ‘postsocialism’ almost exclusively as a temporal marker to denote the time period after socialism, a straightforward and still very popular use today.

Two other uses of ‘postsocialism’ have joined this temporal one. One is that of postsocialism as a political movement: as a political break with socialism. The collapse of state socialism precipitated a global refiguring of left politics. Nancy Fraser articulated this best when she said that the dissolution of the Soviet Union spelled ‘a larger crisis of confidence and crisis of vision on the left’ (Fraser & Alldred 1999, p. 2). With state socialism disappeared what had seemed for a long time a viable political alternative to capitalism. The ideas of the New Left, with its rejection of class struggle and its embrace of new social movements and identity politics, had carried the day. There no longer seemed to be an alternative to capitalism. ‘It seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature’, wrote Fredric Jameson in the aftermath of the socialist collapse, ‘than the breakdown of late capitalism’ (Jameson 1994, p. xii). On the other hand, the socialist collapse also meant freedom from a repressive system which had belied the socialist promise and whose crimes only fully came to light after its collapse (Courtois *et al.* 1999).

The final use, most important for this article, is that of postsocialism as a concept: as an attempt to make theoretical sense of the processes occurring after socialism. The aim of postsocialism as a concept was not to present one general theory of postsocialism, but rather to challenge received ideas developed in a Western context—democracy, property, civil society, class and so on—with the experience of postsocialist societies (Verdery 1996). Postsocialism stressed the openness of the postsocialist moment, an important principle at a time when the future of the ex-socialist countries seemed to lie in privatisation, liberalisation and democratisation—the holy trinity of the transition that Western institutions such as the IMF and Western economists had foreseen. ‘Shock

therapy’—the sudden rather than incremental introduction of free markets, private property rights, price liberalisation and elections—swept through the former socialist states. ‘Big bang’ entered the Russian lexicon, with its connotations of accomplishing everything in one fell swoop and the suggestion of a complete reset. ‘Transitology’, the science of how to most effectively engineer the transition towards democracy and a market economy, was the order of the day (Kubik 2013).

Against the notion of transition and the science of transitology, scholars of postsocialism pitted the idea of transformation. ‘We see social change not as transition from one order to another but as transformation—rearrangements, reconfigurations, and recombinations that yield new interweavings of the multiple social logics that are a modern society’ (Stark & Bruszt 1998, p. 7). In that sense, postsocialism could perhaps better be understood as a sensibility, a particular perspective, rather than as a concept. Against any singular, linear vision of a path from socialism to capitalism, scholars of postsocialism upheld a plurality of lifeworlds and experiences (Stenning & Hörschelmann 2008). This plurality nevertheless shared a common assumption: that socialism had had a lasting effect on people. Svetlana Alexievich put it like this:

Communism had an insane plan: to remake ‘the old breed of man’, [sic] ancient Adam. And it really worked ... Perhaps it was communism’s only achievement. Seventy-plus years in the Marxist–Leninist laboratory gave rise to a new man: Homo Sovieticus ... Although we now live in separate countries and speak different languages, you couldn’t mistake us for anyone else. (Alexievich 2016, p. 3)

Socialism had therefore been not only a political and economic system but a ‘cognitive organization of the world’ (Verdery 1996, p. 4). Unravelling postsocialism thus also meant coming to terms with socialism, hence the focus on the ‘unmaking of Soviet life’ (Humphrey 2002). The prefix ‘post-’ only made sense in relation to the noun that it modified.

Making good on the promise of allowing for plurality involved exploring the uncertainties, ambiguities and hybrid forms that the postsocialist transformation engendered, grappling with ‘actually-existing postsocialism’ (Stenning & Hörschelmann 2008, p. 314). Scholars delved into mixed economies and coping strategies such as informal practices (Humphrey 2002; Hann 2006; Stenning *et al.* 2010; Williams *et al.* 2013), uncertain or ‘fuzzy’ property rights (Burawoy & Verdery 1999; Allina-Pisano 2008; Lindner 2013), new entrepreneurial or national subjectivities (Shevchenko 2008; Müller 2009; Oushakine 2009; Zhurzhenko 2010; Makovicky 2014b), gender (Ghodsee 2005; Kürti & Skalník 2009; Ibroscheva 2013) and the transformation of cities (Bodnar 2001; Czepczyński 2008; Hirt 2012).

Anthropologists were at the forefront of shaping what research on postsocialism looked like. In fact, ‘the anthropology of this part of the world gained much of its identity and momentum as fieldwork-based studies plumbed the uncertainties, ironies, incongruities, and unexpected outcomes of the first postsocialist decade’ (Rogers 2010, p. 2). The fall of the Iron Curtain opened up a whole new world that had previously been out of reach for fieldwork (Verdery 1996, pp. 4–8). The important role of on-the-ground experience and fieldwork in postsocialism resonated with geographers (Herrschel 2006; Pickles 2010). The study of postsocialist cities in particular, and thus of the material legacies of postsocialism, has developed into a dynamic field in geography (Ferenčuhová 2016a).

Political scientists and sociologists, by contrast, preferred the term ‘postcommunism’. This choice of terminology has also marked, for quite some time, distinct approaches to the subject. In contrast to postsocialism, scholarship under the label of postcommunism has tended to concentrate more on formal and institutional aspects—regimes, markets, prices, laws, voter preferences, state and party formation—and less on subjectivities and the everyday (Sakwa 1999; King 2000; Outhwaite & Ray 2005). Postcommunism was more concerned if not with formal models than at least with abstraction and comparison. The usage of the two terms ‘postsocialism’ and ‘postcommunism’ mirrors Marxist thinking insofar as ‘socialism’ referred to the lived experience of ‘actually-existing socialism’, a transitional stage to ‘communism’ as the programmatic ideology and ultimate goal (Marx 1962).

Recently, however, postsocialism and postcommunism have found increasing common ground with a stronger emphasis in political science on interpretive methods and fieldwork. Ethnography has enjoyed rising popularity (Joseph *et al.* 2007; Schatz 2009) and new fields, such as international political sociology, have emerged that place a stronger emphasis on lived practices and social theory (Neumann 2002; Bigo & Walker 2007). Kubik’s (2013) proposition in favour of ‘contextual holism’ as an approach to postcommunism reflects this convergence. His emphasis on localism, informality, historicisation and culture, paired with a plea for ethnographic sensibilities, positions postcommunism much more closely to postsocialism than ever before.

If there was thus one unifying thread across postsocialism (and postcommunism), it was the eschewal of teleological narratives of transition and of the ultimate annihilation of difference. It was a radical openness to uncertainty and surprise, and a readiness to interrogate Western concepts using the experience of the postsocialist world. It was a commitment towards impurities and hybrids that reflected a process of transformation in which one order was waning and another one never quite arrived, leaving a state of indeterminacy and therefore opportunity. If indeed ‘we are ... all postcommunists now’ (Sakwa 1999, p. 3), the future for postsocialism seemed bright.

The problems with postsocialism

Postsocialism has blazed important trails, but it has, at the same time, remained a term that is tied to the uncertainties and vagaries of the immediate aftermath of the collapse of socialism. Provisional at first, it has stuck around for longer than expected, while its object, postsocialist societies, disappeared—or at least underwent profound change. The vanishing object is one problem of postsocialism, discussed in the next section. The specific temporal and spatial assumptions of postsocialism, often remaining unexamined, are another. Postsocialism privileges thinking through ruptures—in fact, through one rupture in particular (that of the socialist collapse)—over thinking through continuities, as the section ‘Privileging rupture’ argues. It also remains much wedded to a territorial notion of space as a bounded container, as discussed in the section ‘Territorial trap’. Third and finally, postsocialism risks being politically disempowering. The career of the term has orientalising echoes and blanks out socialism, in its many guises, as part of a vision for political futures, as the last two sections, ‘Orientalising constitution’ and ‘No socialism after postsocialism’, show.

A disappearing object

If we take a classic definition of postsocialism as the time period marked by the end of socialism, I think we can safely say: that period is history. Over the past years, postsocialism as a concept has become increasingly out of tune with recent developments in the former socialist countries, overestimating the weight the socialist experience still carries today. As Boyer and Yurchak wrote, ten years ago: ‘to put it bluntly, postsocialist studies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (FSU) have a vanishing object’ (Boyer & Yurchak 2008, p. 9). Socialism is no longer the prime reference point for people in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, but rather one among many, including neoliberalism, nationalism, consumption, Europeanisation and globalisation. Several important events have started to eclipse the socialist collapse—or at least have decisively shaped the trajectories of the ex-socialist countries. The successive accessions of many ex-socialist states to the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013 have reoriented social, economic and political ties. Some authors pronounced postsocialism dead with the 2004 accession round (Ost 2009). In many ways, the new member states are now closer to Western Europe than to their Eastern neighbours. The Russian involvement in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014, culminating in the annexation of Crimea, has further deepened rifts between the post-Soviet states, belying the idea of a common socialist heritage in politics. The financial crisis of 2008 showed ex-socialist states how deeply they were engaged in the global economy.

Postsocialism thus seems to be nearing the end of its life and, with each year, is less and less able to provide a pertinent frame for analysing societies. Back in 2002, Caroline Humphrey was already expressing a sense of foreboding that the term would have a rather short lease of life: ‘As the generations brought up under socialist regimes disappear from the political scene, the category of postsocialism is likely to break apart and disappear’ (Humphrey 2001, p. 13). Platt (2009) made a more damning case for the demise of postsocialism. He sees it as a vestige of the chaotic period of the 1990s, when the range of futures seemed wide open. Two distinct paths appear to have emerged for the former socialist countries, neither of which accords socialism much prominence: one that emphasises continuity over a long period from pre-socialism to socialism to today (dominant in Russia and Belarus, for example), where the postsocialist period does not mark a significant break with what came before; and another path, taken by many of the new EU member states, for example, in which memories of the socialist period are fading—or have been erased—as integration with Europe proceeds apace. For Platt, then, ‘the divergence of the historical experience of the various societies and polities that occupy the region has progressed to the point that no one discursive lens, such as that of the “postsocialist,” can be applied in an even manner to their very different present realities’ (2009, pp. 9–10).

Many people living in the former socialist countries explicitly disavow the idea of being postsocialist: ‘new generations of entrepreneurs, politicians, ambassadors and trend-setters appear increasingly unwilling to accept the term postsocialism, seeing it as constrictive and backwards looking’ (Stenning & Hörschelmann 2008, p. 329; Koch 2016). One could even argue that postsocialism as a term buttresses a continued exoticisation of the East as Other and backward, ‘defining the present in terms of its past’ (Sakwa 1999, p. 3).

People's lives are resolutely in the present of neoliberal reform (Makovicky 2014b; Chelcea & Druță 2016), precariousness (O'Neill 2017), international migration and mobilities (Burrell & Hörschelmann 2014; Keough 2016), populist authoritarianism and the politics of anger (Ost 2006), and global economic links (Rogers 2015). This is not to say that the experience of socialism no longer plays any role, but rather that socialism is no longer a unifying experience and that other experiences increasingly overwrite it.

Not only have social, political and economic realities changed, but so have scholars. A generation of new scholars has entered the scene who did not conduct research during socialism. For them, unlike for their predecessors, socialism is no longer the major reference point against which they analyse the social worlds of the former socialist countries. They are steeped in different debates, around neoliberalisation, mobilities, materialities, globalisation and migration, focusing more on links and connections than on distinction and difference.

The validity of postsocialism hinged not only on the continuing importance of the experience of socialism, but also on that of postsocialism's constitutive Other: transitology. However, just as the imprint of socialism has faded away, so has the prominence of transitology. It probably never existed as a proper unified scholarly approach in the first place (Gans-Morse 2004), but rather as a policy paradigm for reforms in the immediate period after the breakup of socialist institutions. By the early 2000s even organisations close to policymakers, such as think tanks, started to question the transition paradigm as outdated and urged acceptance of the hybrid nature of regimes in the former socialist countries (Carothers 2002). Even Erik Berglöf, the Chief Economist of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), stalwart of transition thinking and stubborn publisher of a large set of annual transition indicators for former socialist countries, had to recognise that 'there is no unique endpoint for transition, either at the sectoral or the country level, as countries will differ based on their political and economic culture' (EBRD 2010, p. 3). With transitology gone, postsocialism's emphasis on plurality and openness seems increasingly moot. One is reminded of Laclau's (1990) formulation that the victory over an antagonist—here transitology—leads not to triumph, but to the questioning of one's very own condition of possibility.

What has also passed is the protean moment that postsocialism signalled. What Sakwa called 'the genesis environment' back in 1999 no longer exists, if indeed it existed at all (Sakwa 1999, p. 4). 'With so much apparently up for grabs at the end of 1989 and in the early months of 1990, so much fell into rather conventional ... patterns' (Outhwaite & Ray 2005, p. 3). Or as Benjamin and Baudrillard put it, somewhat overstating the case: 'the iron curtain was drawn to reveal an insatiable appetite for simulation' (Benjamin & Baudrillard 1997, p. 19). Postsocialism, therefore, did not prove as disruptive as it had seemed in the beginning, and has become less distinctive and therefore more elusive as a concept than it was in the 1990s.

Privileging rupture

The term postsocialism has one constitutive rupture at its centre: the collapse of socialism. It is in relation to that rupture that postsocialism makes sense of the social world and its temporal constitution. We are faced with an implicit privileging of 1989/1992 as a

historical moment—a privileging that suggests a break (rather than continuity) and that places an emphasis on socialism as the dominant force (rather than on, say, imperialism or capitalism). In emphasising the break rather than continuity, we privilege dichotomies that re-inscribe the notion of the East as an exotic ‘Other’, different from the West (Pobłocki 2009). What would happen if we abandoned, for a moment, our habit of thinking in a before/after mode around 1989/1992, and the socialist collapse became just one among many events—along with 1917, 1945, 1956, 1968, 1980, 2004, 2014—in a series of continued interruptions in a perpetual state of liminality (Bailyn *et al.* 2018)? What if we extended our analytical gaze even further back in time, over the *longue durée* of Eurasia (Hann 2006, pp. 241–56), or thought more in flows and continuities rather than in events and differences? Scholars have pointed out, of course, the continuities of a ‘capitalism [built] on and with the ruins of socialism’ (Pickles & Smith 1998, p. 2), for example, through examining the emergence of hybrid forms. But the term ‘postsocialism’ tempts us to return to one historical event (and its aftermath) rather than to a plethora of events and to continuities.²

In a similar vein, the prefix ‘post-’ risks reifying socialism into a uniform experience that it never was (Skalnik 2002; Szelényi 2015). ‘Actually existing socialism’ was a far cry from its utopian, communist ambition and, in many cases, significant capitalist elements characterised socialist economies. Buck-Morss (2002, p. xv) goes so far as to argue that ‘Socialism failed ... because it mimicked capitalism too faithfully’. Markets and competition were a key ingredient of the socialist experience in Hungary and Yugoslavia (Bockman 2011), while informal barter trade or black markets were rampant throughout the socialist countries (Ledeneva 1998). Hungarian ‘goulash communism’ was one of the most prominent examples of a significant presence of market elements under socialism. Production and orientation towards the future—the mainstays of most communist economies—were less strongly privileged in Hungary, where consumption and the provision of material well-being in the present enjoyed significant importance. Thus, argues Benczes (2016), the real turning point for Hungary was not 1989–1991 but 1968, which marked the introduction of economic reform policies.

‘Postsocialism’ therefore risks glossing over the varying degrees to which countries in the East are still, are no longer or have never been postsocialist—the ‘multiple postsocialisms’ (Benovska-Sabkova 2014, p. 96). Consider Lithuania and Belarus as two nominally postsocialist countries sharing a border, with extremely different relationships to their socialist period. While in Belarus socialism appears to never have ended in the first place, Lithuania puts a strong emphasis on the break between the socialist period and the present, which has brought integration into the EU and the global marketplace.

Territorial trap

The temporal constitution of postsocialism in terms of rupture is paralleled by a spatial circumscription of the term to territories. Postsocialism started with a sense that the postsocialist condition had global significance. Twenty-five years later, the diagnosis is more sober: postsocialism as a concept has not reached much beyond the territories of the

²Postcolonialism has seen critiques to a similar effect (Shohat 1992; Dirlík 1994; Hall 1996).

ex-socialist states. Its influence on theorising outside the postsocialist realm has been limited. The euphoric sense that, after the collapse of state socialism, ‘we are all postsocialist now’ and postsocialist studies would become relevant around the world, proved unfounded. ‘If, for three decades, postsocialism has not travelled outside of Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, we do not see it being applied elsewhere productively and substantively in the future’, was Chelcea and Druță’s sanguine assessment. ‘When it comes to postsocialism, area studies themes seem to predominate over innovative cross-fertilization of different geographic regions’ (Chelcea & Druță 2016, p. 539).

Furthermore, the term ‘postsocialism’ has travelled in a rather selective fashion even in the former socialist states. Pickles diagnosed quite rightly a ‘*narrowing of geographical vision* such that postsocialism became first and foremost a question of Central and Eastern Europe on its path to the EU’ (Pickles 2010, p. 131). This statement confirms observations that postsocialism is structured around a narrative of return—a return to normality, modernity and Europe (Lagerspetz 1999)—that applies to a particular range of mostly East European states. Indeed, debates about postsocialism have had much less currency further east, in the former republics of the Soviet Union. Postsocialism has had even less purchase in other postsocialist countries outside Eastern Europe and Eurasia, for example, in Africa (see also Herrschel 2006; Pitcher & Askew 2006). ‘We are all postsocialist now’, as catchy as the slogan may sound, has not meant that postsocialism has gone transnational (Suchland 2011b).

That limited geographical reach is owed, I think, to a particular geographical imagination underpinning the term postsocialism: that of space as (bounded) territory. Space as territory is made up of discrete blocks, arranged neatly next to each other. It is the dominant imagination of the international system of states, which carve up the planet along their territorial boundaries. That notion is based on a distinction between inside and outside: what is inside cannot be outside at the same time, and *vice versa*. Such a territorial constitution also characterises postsocialism: it tends to locate postsocialism in particular countries and draws clear boundaries around it. Postsocialism happens in Bulgaria, not in Britain.

This ‘territorial trap’, as Agnew (1994) calls it, comes at significant cost: it disregards other, non-territorial forms of spatiality. It fixes postsocialism to a particular place and in so doing limits its geographical reach. It discounts a relational, deterritorialised view of space, which has gained relevance with the spread of new communication technologies and the increased mobility of people, information and commodities in the world, making traditional national boundaries increasingly fuzzy. Rogers (2010) points out how the former socialist states are now embedded in global circuits: Russian oil companies invest in Germany, Romanian care workers move into Austrian households, French tourists relax on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, Qatari money bankrolls Russian business, Azerbaijan hosts the European Games, American couples adopt children from Ukrainian orphanages. A territorial view of postsocialism tends to cordon off postsocialist societies and postsocialist theorising as special cases rather than inserting them into debates elsewhere around the world (Tuvikene 2016; Gentile 2018).

Orientalising constitution

A particular epistemological relation of domination marks postsocialism: it emerged as an analytical tool of Western scholarship to make sense of what was happening in the former

socialist countries in the early 1990s. Knowledge production under the label of ‘postsocialism’ reflects specifically Western discourses, approaches and knowledge claims about the East (Skalník 2002; Buchowski 2004; Červinková 2012). Červinková does not mince words: ‘postsocialism is an orientaling concept through which western anthropologists constructed postcommunist Europe’ (Červinková 2012, p. 159).

This is not just an argument about the origin or institutional affiliation of formative scholars, although it is this as well. It is more a question of what counts as valid knowledge and for what reasons. Eastern scholars have faulted Anglophone scholarship for discarding or ignoring local academic accounts and instead importing high-level theorising from the West, resulting in a unidirectional flow of Western theories being applied to the East (Timár 2004). Hann’s advice for a scholar from the former socialist countries lends itself to be read as recommending self-colonisation as a career strategy: ‘those attracted to the new styles of anthropology coming from the West may want to apply their new models to their home society, in order to highlight the novelty of their approaches as compared with the older national ethnographer’ (Hann 2002, p. 14). ‘Would it be possible’, Kürti and Skalník (2009, p. 19) retort, ‘to envision a situation in which US and “Western” colleagues begin their theoretical discussions by highlighting the works of local scholars (more often than not written in native languages) before they turn to the usual and fashionable practice of name dropping and elite theorizing?’³

This debate about Western intellectual hegemony has mostly raged in anthropology, but the diagnosis applies no less to sociology, geography, history, political science and area studies.⁴ Thus, political scientist-cum-historian King considers ‘postcommunist Europe and Eurasia [as] fertile ground for testing theories that were developed in other geographical contexts’ (King 2000, p. 145). The East thus serves, at best, as a guinea pig for assessing the validity of Western theories. This mirrors the classic colonial attitude in which the non-West is treated ‘less as sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of raw fact: of the minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012, p. 114). In the most charitable readings, empirical evidence from the East may still lead to a modification of Western theories. This is the general thrust of monographs that examine how the experience of postsocialism asks for a revision of theories about class, modernisation, solidarity, democracy, and property (Outhwaite & Ray 2005; Sakwa 1999, pp. 97–113). To consider the East as a source of new theorising, however, seems unimaginable. Verdery’s (Hann *et al.* 2001, p. 20) plea to ‘give voice to the “natives” as analysts of their own condition’ continues to ring hollow.

This enactment of the inferiority of Eastern scholarship is part and parcel of the import or imposition of market-oriented Western political and economic reforms in the 1990s. It has resulted in an academic capitalism (Paasi 2005) which judges scholars in the East more

³To heed this criticism, this article cites mostly ‘local’ (Kürti and Skalník’s term) scholars, but it does so through the medium of the English language, intervening in the Anglophone debate. In so doing, it seeks to pluralise and make visible the multiple voices present in Anglophone debates beyond ‘elite theorising’ (Rodríguez-Pose 2004). While a political statement, this is at the same time a pragmatic choice. Ideally, one would be able to draw on (and contribute to) debates in a multitude of ‘local’ languages, but my knowledge of these remains limited to just two.

⁴See Timár (2004) on geography; Tlostanova (2015) on sociology and area studies.

and more through metrics that require submission to an academic system in which Western, specifically Anglophone, scholarship dominates. Promotion, grant success and salaries become dependent on journal rankings, impact factors and citations of publications, often condensed into just one or two metrics (Aavik & Marling 2018). University administrations increasingly issue work contracts that incorporate goals for performance metrics. This system creates opportunities, often for younger scholars who are more familiar with the codes and practices of Anglophone academia, but it also institutes a relation of domination through the need to cater and submit to debates whose terms are set elsewhere. That scholars from the former socialist countries now seem to have embraced ‘postsocialism’, despite serious reservations (Buchowski 2004), may be one indication of its neocolonising success.

This orientalist tendency is one striking difference between postsocialism and postcolonialism, which certainly complicates the liaison between the two approaches that some authors propose (Spivak *et al.* 2006; Stenning & Hörschelmann 2008; Chari & Verdery 2009), while others caution against what they consider ‘a fraught relationship’ (Tlostanova 2012, p. 130). Unlike postsocialism, postcolonialism emerged as a liberatory epistemological critique of colonialism, pioneered by some of the very subjects of that colonialism. While postcolonialism was seen as an act of liberation and self-determination, postsocialism all too often is considered as passing from the yoke of one master (the Soviet Union) to that of another (the West). Postsocialism therefore stands in the way of a decolonial impetus of theorising (Tlostanova 2012) that does not take Western concepts as its starting point but rather theorises directly ‘from the East’, thus inverting knowledge hierarchies.

No socialism after postsocialism

Is there socialism after postsocialism? What may sound like a cheap pun raises a thorny issue: that of the future of a socialist—or even just social—politics in the postsocialist realm. Socialism may not have been monovalent, but it did share a set of common ideas of fair wages, redistribution, social justice, family protection and gender equality. Many people on the left would agree that these ideas form part of a political agenda worth pursuing (Mouffe 1992; Fraser 1997; Gibson-Graham 2006). Bernie Sanders, contender for the nomination for presidential candidate of the Democratic Party of the United States in the 2016 election, billed himself as a ‘democratic socialist’. His programme included universal healthcare and free education but stopped short of nationalising private companies. The point is not a wholesale resurrection of Marxist–Leninist socialism as an economic system, but that socialism becomes imaginable, perhaps not as a full-scale alternative, but as a legitimate political position to inform agonistic debate in a radical democracy (Mouffe 1992).

Unlike postcolonialism, which codes colonialism unambiguously as domination, the political compass of postsocialism is more muddled: while Marxist–Leninist socialism is widely perceived as a failure, socialist ideas continue to exert attraction as political alternatives to capitalism. As the *Washington Post* noted on Sanders’ campaign:

Twenty-four years after the end of the Cold War, many Americans no longer associate socialism with fear or missiles—or with failure, food lines or empty Soviet supermarkets. A word that their elders saw as a slur had become a blank, open for Sanders to define. (Weigel & Fahrenthold 2015)

In the erstwhile socialist countries, however, such a reimagination of socialism is more difficult. This is evident in the ritualistic condemnation of the socialist period in response to all kinds of political demands, such as better public services, subsidies for public transport or redistribution that are easily dismissed as ‘socialist’ (Chelcea & Druță 2016). Being on the left often becomes synonymous with wanting to return to Marxist–Leninist state socialism (Timár 2003). In this vein, socialism becomes what Žižek (2001) called an ‘ideological antioxidant’: a threatening proposition that pre-empts the serious discussion of any radical emancipatory political project.

The notion of postsocialism obstructs rather than aids such a reimagination of socialism. Labelling societies as postsocialist suggests that socialism is over and done with and that it comes in one dominant shape: the Marxist–Leninist variant. It makes it difficult to admit and discern the emergence of socialist projects and to espouse variegated socialisms as an alternative to the current political and economic preference for neoliberal or state-led capitalism in much of the East, relegating them to the past (Mihăilescu 2014). While postsocialism once held the promise that there might be other ways of thinking about socialism—market socialism, eco-socialism, libertarian socialism—rather than the dominant Marxist–Leninist one (Jameson 1994, pp. 73–4), scholars have been relatively uninterested in the reawakening of contentious politics and the emergence of a new Left in several ex-socialist countries (Štikš 2015; Baća 2017). As such, postsocialism risks becoming politically disempowering rather than liberating, describing the all-powerful dominance of neoliberalism without making space for socialist demands as a valid alternative. The only imaginable future for postsocialist societies then becomes a capitalist one. In other words, there is no socialism after postsocialism.

Conclusion: and what comes next?

It is time to say goodbye to postsocialism. To say goodbye to a term that was meant as provisional in the first place, that has reached its end of life and that increasingly obstructs rather than liberates; a term that ties us to the past rather than taking us towards the future; that tethers us to a territory rather than helping us deterritorialise; that reflects an uneven power to produce what counts as valid knowledge. In 2008, Stenning and Horschelmann asked: ‘do we still need postsocialism?’. Ten years later it is time, I think, to answer with a tentative ‘no’.


Does that mean that former socialist countries have become like the rest of the world? That the capitalist transition, after all, did take place and that all difference has vanished? The end of postsocialism does not mean the end of difference, but that the difference we see is no longer owing to a socialist past and we need to look for more meaningful ways of framing it. Furthermore, we need to explore multiple connections and commit to ‘being-with in a world of simultaneous interconnection and ontological difference’ (Chari 2016, p. 792).

One way of responding to critique would be to reanimate postsocialism. In fact, that is how many authors critical of one or several aspects of postsocialism have responded (Rogers 2010; Borelli & Mattioli 2013; Dunn & Verdery 2015; Ferenčuhová 2016b; Holland & Derrick 2016). This way, we could perhaps correct for postsocialism’s territorial imagination. But could we resurrect its vanishing object and exorcise its orientalising streaks? I doubt it.

If critique has been the major purpose of this article, it is from that critique that the contours of a new project can emerge. If Makovicky (2014a, p. 3) is correct that ‘postsocialism continues to be bandied about for lack of a better alternative’, then we need to look for alternatives. Such an alternative project would be attuned to the plurality of forces that shape ex-socialist countries today, no longer referring back to socialism as the major reference point. It would not have sharp boundaries, but blurred, porous ones, not contiguous. We would happen upon unexpected comparisons, analysing, for example, the similarities between the United States and Russia as neopatrimonial, carceral garrison states. Such a project would still preserve differences between the West, the East, the North and the South, while also emphasising multiple connections. Most of all, perhaps, it would also be a project that creates space for a progressive political agenda beyond the Scylla of neoliberalisation and the Charybdis of one-party socialism.

We would have to imagine this alternative not as the testing ground of Western theories, but as a wellspring of concepts in its own right. Thinking in terms of both connection and difference would allow us to theorise not just about the East, but with the East: the ‘know-where’ is just as important as the ‘know-what’ (Tlostanova 2015). It would invite us to theorise US nationalism from Russia, British populism from Hungary, urban geopolitics from Ukraine, German borders from Poland and global connectivity from the ‘New Silk Road’ in Tajikistan. This alternative would become a collective endeavour shaped, in good deterritorialised fashion, by scholars in Poland and Portugal, Bulgaria and Belgium, Moldova and Mozambique, Czechia and China.

The time is ripe, certainly more so than in the 1990s, as scholars from across former socialist countries have raised their voices in debates about the future of postsocialism. Let us, together, reclaim whatever comes after postsocialism not as a geographical descriptor, but as a conceptual inspiration that fires imaginations and as a political project that deserves its name. *Goodbye, Lenin!*, the film, ends in a reversal of history, with a surge of people storming the Berlin Wall from the West to join the East.

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