

## **Why don't East European movements address inequalities the way Western European movements do? A review essay on the availability of movement-relevant research**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper addresses the question of available movement-relevant research for contemporary East European movements. It asks how much existing research on post-socialist societies and social movements helps contemporary activists to make sense of their own situations and their relationship to other movements, the repertoires of which they often emulate. Building on the examples of two research fields with high movement-relevance potential, the anthropology of post-socialisms and social movement research on Eastern Europe, the paper demonstrates the hardship and necessity of social research to conceptualize local social and political relations beyond core-biased research frameworks, Cold War and modernizationist essentializations, in order to provide a relevant comparative perspective on local movements to make sense of their own struggles as part of global history.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe, social movements, movement-relevant research, anthropology of post-socialism, social movement studies, hierarchies of knowledge

One evening in July, 2013, I was sitting in the middle of Tsar Osvoboditel Boulevard in central Sofia, speaking to a group of protesters, participants in a long row of ongoing demonstrations. I came to Sofia for a conference organized by a group called Working Group on Postsocialist Neoliberalism and Social Movements. Each night after the discussions, we would participate in the protests. Demonstrators demanded the resignation of the Socialist government headed by Plamen Oresharski – a technocrat leading the government after the former cabinet of Boyko Borisov resigned due to previous massive protests which, that time, demanded his resignation (the cause being austerity measures during the recession, encouraged by the European Union and the IMF). The summer protests were blamed by many commentators for not going far enough in their analysis and claims, and a lack of sophisticated discussions of instrumental politics. Indeed, the practice of the protests was dominated by a rejection of speakers who could turn public presence into verbalized political arguments. Slogans were also toned down; the ones remaining comprised general demands about corruption, resignation of the government, and the interests of the nation.

That night was the 40th night of peaceful protests in a row. In a couple of hours, some violence was to follow, as police cleared way for a coach bringing out lawmakers, ministers and journalists who had barricaded themselves within the Parliament. My conversation partners and I did not know about this yet. We spoke of their motivations for continued participation in the protests. They told me about hardships of sustaining households through juggling incomes and bills. They spoke of politicians not caring about this. Young members told me about their sense of a lack of a future. A 19-year student, the most zealous of my conversation partners, concluded our discussion telling me she just started her BA year in political science, to “understand why it is so, that people become poorer and poorer, and still vote for politicians who don’t help them.” She said she wanted to understand that so that she could help changing it.

Indeed: is there a pool of social scientific knowledge available for activists in new demonstrations, which might help them make sense of their situation? As they already employ slogans and organizing techniques seen in other movements, inspire and exchange messages of support with each other, do they have tools at hand to relevantly compare their own case to the situations other movements are born from? This essay argues that in terms of such comparative knowledge available, there is an impasse in the case of Eastern European movements, linked to broader processes of hierarchical knowledge production.

Among the social scientific fields dealing with Eastern European and post-socialist development, including politics and social movements, it addresses two disciplines which can be considered specifically relevant to that matter. The first is the anthropology of post-socialism, a branch of social scientific investigation which, due to its disciplinary background, was the first to criticize both direct applications of Western concepts and the essentializations of East/West or capitalist/socialist differences. It did so with the public sociological ambition of contributing to the reintegration of Eastern European social reflection into the wider circulation of reflections on various social situations across the globe, surpassing the essentializing effect of Cold War production of knowledge and ideologies. The second field is that of social movement studies (SMS), a relatively young member of the social scientific disciplines which, due to the new wave of mobilizations in response to the global crisis, is going through a disciplinary boom both in Western and Eastern European science.

Instead of monographic overviews, the essay addresses both fields only to the extent of an argument over the logic of disjuncture between social scientific reflection and movement-relevant reflection. It does not pertain that these two fields, not to mention the cumulative results of other social disciplines, have not produced pieces of knowledge that would be useful for local movements at all. The present argument will be limited to illustrating the logic of disjuncture, and leave both the assembling of relevant pieces of knowledge, and the closer investigation of the actual and possible mechanisms of transmission, for other occasions.

## **Anthropology of post-socialism: a challenge to universal categories**

Decolonial studies provide enough material for the theoretical argument that the universalization of social forms developed at the commanding heights of global capitalism goes together with an epistemic suppression of the social experience at the subordinate side of the same system. Decolonial authors also pointed out that for local actors, to be able to think of their societies in emancipatory terms, a supersession of universalized core categories is necessary. Contributions by authors like Alexander Kiossev (1995), Maria Todorova (1997), Manuela Boatecă (2003) or Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (2010) analyzed knowledge on Eastern European societies from this perspective. To pick just one example, József Böröcz (1997) demonstrated in a depressingly brilliant piece what the usage of Anthony Giddens' *Introduction to Sociology* means in Hungarian sociological training. While it successfully creates a sociological imaginary fit for conceptualizing contemporary British social forms and problems as universal sociological problems, it solidifies the gap between these 'normal' forms and local 'pathological/exotic' forms, and pushes existing knowledge on local social historical formations into the background as secondary details.

Anthropology, due to its attention to the complex dimensions of social aspects, including the interaction of local and global developments, has had a specific place in this respect in the process of knowledge production on the region. The rich heritage of anthropology of socialism and post-socialism provides many of the viewpoints and insights that might help go beyond the epistemic domination of core-centric social knowledge. The anthropology of post-socialism has been among the first scholarly discourses to emphasize the complexity of post-socialist transformations against linear-normative conceptions of transition.

In contrast to normative discourses which played on post-socialist people's "laziness" against the requirements of their new freedom on the free market, anthropological descriptions of the transformation of work, property relations, and morals, brought to the fore the creative and active agency of local people among transnationally defined environments (Lampland 1995, Verdery 2003, Dunn 2004, Creed 2010). In understanding ethnic conflict, it broke down essentialist and territorialist notions into analyses of transnational symbolic and power processes, elite politics, everyday interactions, and economic factors in social group formation (Woodward 1995, Ost 2006, Brubaker et al. 2006, Petrovici 2011). Anthropologists were among the first to criticize the continuation of Cold War categories in post-socialist essentializations of the "socialist past" and its "heritage" as corruption, backwardness, or nostalgia (Ledeneva 1998, Yurchak 2013, Todorova and Gille 2010), pointing out new and changing functions of the social forms labeled as "heritage".

Outside the sphere of anthropological circles, however, in many spheres of social, scholarly and political discussions, social and political concepts of the region continued to be defined in hierarchical binaries (East and West,

regression and modernity). They were connected to frames of global hierarchy (West-East-South/First-Second-Third World) and development normatives ("catching up" in time with the developed West). Internal political positions and mutual evaluations of social positions were understood and worded within those frames. Abstract concepts of social and political relations, such as "democracy", "work", or "minorities", were defined within the same relations. Corresponding essentializations of 'Communism', 'nation', 'East vs. West' or the 'people' as the locus of backwardness have been subject to anthropological analysis (Gille 2010, Melegh 2006, Poenaru 2014).

Drawing on Steven Sampson's (2003) criticism of the gap between issues represented in Western-funded NGO 'project societies' and issues locally seen as significant, Zsuzsa Gille speaks of an epistemological "decapitation of society" on a more general level in post-socialist contexts. She claims that through the massive implementation of core-centric politics of knowledge and representation, post-socialist society was "left without its own, one might say, organic intellectuals, who could represent it in international circles. We can already see" – warns Gille, "how the extreme right wing fills the vacuum resulting from this 'decapitation of society' with emotional and symbolic politics".

### **Universal categories in situated movements – the case of the "Eastern Enlargement" of a "global" case**

In my understanding, Gille's notion of "decapitation" refers to the macro-institutional context which hindered the development of local societies' own capacities to produce a knowledge fit to communicate between local experience and global context. This level of macro institutions is one where the influence of anthropology can be least expected. It is the level of knowledge as power, defined by the interest struggles of those in power. The post-socialist integration of East European states into the structures of global capitalism in its neoliberalization phase happened in a position of dependence, with little room for maneuver for local elites. All of them accepted the necessity of integration and the hierarchies that came with it. No wonder those elites and their institutions who fulfilled the positions of local mediators of that integration continued to speak the language of essentialized global hierarchies – and of essentialized "small differences" of those within the struggle of "catching up".

But what about social movements? Aren't they organic developments from inside the body of local societies, which in their conceptualizations, produce vocabularies to name the circumstances which breed them? Are movements, too, part of the "decapitation" phenomenon? The graver side of Gille's argument is that the new extreme right is itself a product of the transnational process of "decapitation". This is an argument similar to Franz Fanon's, who argues that colonial cultural forms, which substitute an essentialized notion of race for structural domination, breed fundamentalist counter-concepts of black superiority (Fanon 1968).

Movements, too, are defined by the macro-dynamics of knowledge production. Much good analysis is already available on the transformation of late socialist dissident debates into mainstream legitimization discourses of post-socialist marketization, leaving behind earlier notes of local specificity and popular interest for the sake of universal ideas of NGO-ized civil society (Eyal 2003, Sampson 2003, Vetta 2009, Valiavicharska 2014).

My own first experience was with 5 years' fieldwork in Romanian and Hungarian activist groups of the alterglobalization movement, between 2004 and 2009. Since the alterglobalization movement was one deeply influenced by, and influential on, anthropological understandings of new movements – take David Graeber's role in connecting anarchist and alterglobalizationist traditions to the new Occupy wave –, the case of postsocialist alterglobalist groups may be of interest here. For me, as for many participants and sympathetic commentators, East European alterglobalism featured the hope of linking post-socialist grievances to global processes, and building a bottom-up democratic organization in post-socialist countries where first impressions of an active civil society were decreasing after the regime change. Hopes notwithstanding, my field experience taught me that there is a discontinuity between the local reality of the movements, and the practice of Western movements which they took as their model – and which the majority of scholarly (including anthropological) descriptions of the movement celebrated as the 'global' movement reality. That discontinuity pointed my attention to the situated nature of the Western movement ideology itself, which I described later as born at a turning point in the coalition processes of Western intellectuals and activists, a point of divergence between political liberals and market liberals.

In the “Eastern Enlargement process” of the European alterglobalization movement, Eastern European movement groups were incorporated in that ideology without an acknowledgement of the specificities of post-socialist contexts. Even the case of using red flags as symbols did not make it to the agenda of serious discussions on significant forums of the movement. Eastern European activists, laden with post-socialist inferiority complex, struggled to “catch up” with the position of a “global activist” through taking over the frames and practices of their Western peers. They interpreted the resulting gap between their practice and their actual context as coming from Eastern Europe's “backwardness”. The idea of autonomy, so central to the movement, became in the practice of Eastern European activists an ideological tool to legitimate and protect their own positions as unrelated to their post-socialist contexts. This effect I identified as linked (also in terms of concrete historical continuity) to the anti-political idea of “autonomy” in the dissident movement of late socialism. At that time, too, it was a notion of freedom and equality which worked as a tool of downplaying local reality, at the price of bringing recognition to its activists as full value subjects in core actors' terms.

Alterglobalist activists mostly came from the ranks of educated youth. They put significant effort in making use of the knowledge they accessed through readings or university classes to make sense of their social environment. The

concept of “autonomy” as reality-barrier was crystallized simultaneously with the deployment of these efforts, and the series of small defeats when the ideas that gave them hope clashed with their actual circumstances. “They don’t understand that (...) we live in a NETWORK SOCIETY, where networks have become the new logic of human interaction everywhere” – a Romanian organizer complained, quoting Manuel Castells, when Romanian journalists and police were reluctant to behave according to theory. In the end, old essentializations came to fill in the gap. “In the Balkans, everything is possible” – the title of a Hungarian Indymedia article remarked bitterly, after a sit-in action to save a monument building from real estate speculation failed.

### **Geopolitical categories in contemporary movements**

Since 2008, in Eastern Europe, as elsewhere, we are witnessing a massive revival of movement activity. In North America, movements in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath have been conceptualized in terms of “capitalism” (as North American capitalism). In Europe they were linked to the crisis of the European project. Both diagnoses generalize core countries’ stories of postwar welfare turning into financialization and later, neoliberal austerity, as the story of a general decline of democratic capitalism. That story does not cover the historical path of other positions in the same global process, including that of Eastern Europe. To point out only one element, the massive austerity wave coupled with neoliberalization in Eastern Europe came together with the last decade and/or implosion of socialist economies. For East Europeans, present news of debt, austerity and unemployment in Western and Southern Europe sound more like their own past than a hitherto unseen injustice of history.

In Eastern Europe, debates around post-2008 movements are framed in terms of post-socialist transition, and its promise of European integration. While North American and European debates are in a position to generalize their organic vocabularies as “the” questions of “capitalism” and “democracy” (a position of power rather than of analytical relevance, breeding many misconceptions), in Eastern Europe discontent vis-à-vis present forms of “democracy” or “capitalism” cannot be expressed on a universal level. In North America and Europe, the generalization of core experience makes possible an analytically mistaken, but practically efficient identification with “universal” causes. In Eastern Europe the same effect of core-centric concepts comes down as a problem of placing oneself in that “universal” problematic.

When middle class groups here, as elsewhere, lose their previous positions, and mobilize against that loss, they move in a contradictory framework of knowledge, in which democracy and welfare as structural relations are transformed into normative tropes of evolution in time (away from backwardness), space (away from the East), and politics (away from Communist authoritarianism). Their claims are for a normality only the promise of which has ever been theirs. Emancipatory ideas of welfare and democracy are bundled

up with the promise of “catching up”. In the real process of post-socialist development, the fulfillment of that promise could become the subjective experience of a small amount of the population, while the rest suffered from a decay in their living standards. Old essentializing notions of transition discourses (Europe, Western life standards, democracy) are charged with the stakes and tensions of different trajectories through post-socialist neoliberalization and crisis.

New geopolitical tensions between Western powers and Russia, and the “New Cold War” discourse deployed in that, work to further shift away the thematic edge of Eastern European mobilizations from the “general” problems raised by movements in core countries. While police clashes with anti-austerity protesters in Brussels, Hungarian protests against the government, voicing similar claims against austerity, are reported on as claims for “democracy” in the Cold War sense of belonging to the right-wing bloc. As think tanks and news site editorials assess the chances of Hungary “hollowing out democracy on the edge of Europe” (Traynor 2014), there seems to be no question where anti-austerity claims belong in the picture. To give an example, an *International Business Times* article, with the telling title “Is Hungary the Next Ukraine? Protests Show Country Ripe for Conflict between Russia and Europe”, explains: “While Hungary was never as close to Russia as Ukraine, an astounding 72 percent of Hungarians said in 2010 most Hungarians are worse off than they were under communist rule when they were intrinsically linked to Russia and the rest of the Eastern Bloc” (Lynch 2014).

Tensions born from divergent class trajectories through cycles of post-socialist austerity and debt-ridden development are translated into a vocabulary of tensions between geopolitical power centers. Such translations follow the line of local elite blocs’ coalitions with either of those power centers. Through the communicative power of both local elite blocs and their transnational allies, the formulation of a vocabulary that could address the interest of local social groups versus both elite blocs and their transnational allies is systematically blocked. Tensions following from that blockage seem to continue to be channeled into the competition between elite blocs.

### **Inadequacy of movements in Eastern Europe?**

Activist and scholarly commentators of recent East European demonstrations often express their shock over the effects of that blockage, including phenomena such as recurrent demonstrations claiming the resignation of governments, while the governments of the same elite blocs circulate in power seats (Tsoneva and Medarov 2013); the geopolitical or ethnic formulations of local problems, the most extreme case manifesting in Ukraine (Ischchenko 2014); or the proliferation of various non-political channels of popular diagnostics of the situation, such as esotericism and conspiracy theories (Dunn 2014). At the first cross-regional conference on social movements in Eastern Europe, held in Bucharest in May 2015, a series of panels addressed explicitly “The

disconnection between socio-economic issues and politics in contemporary social movements in Russia and other post-Soviet countries”.

The difference between Western and Eastern European movement politics has often been addressed in terms of an inadequacy on the part of Eastern movements, lacking both the conceptual and infrastructural tools of Western movements. As many have argued (e.g. Tilly 1999), social movement studies itself is so much tied to its genealogy within the political-economic contexts of postwar Western welfare democracies that its paradigms are hard to apply in different contexts. In research on Eastern European socialisms and postsocialisms, the problem of identifying “movements” as similar to those defined in Western environments has been part of debates and canonizing processes on the role of civil society and social movements in postsocialist transitions. Are local opposition movements examples of the same phenomena as Western movements (Kaldor 2003)? Are they signs/agents of CEE societies’ transition to Western structures? Or are they rather examples of these societies’ backwardness relative to Western models, both in the sense of less activity of the similar kind (Císař 2013), and in the sense of too much activity of an “uncivil” kind (Kopecky and Mudde 2003)? Such questions have not been merely referential. They were part of politically loaded diagnoses and projections within the transnational relations of the Cold War and postsocialist transformation.

Among the processes surrounded by such expectations was the contradiction within the democracy-cum-capitalism package introduced by the regime change – namely, that democratization presupposed the deskilling and precarization of previously proletarianized social groups, without their democratic participation becoming a threat to the marketization process. This contradiction came to be reflected somewhat one-sidedly by scholarly attention to civil society and social movements which tried to address local popular politics based on Western literature.

Within scholarly commentators, SMS’s reception in Eastern Europe started with descriptions of late socialist dissident movements (Máté, 1993), and post-socialist movements after the regime change (Císař, 2008, Piotrowski, 2011). Incorporating the bias of SMS paradigms on affluent Western postwar democratic contexts, the reception of SMS in Eastern Europe tended to look for movement phenomena similar to paradigmatic cases treated by Western literatures. This practice often had the effect of emphasizing instances that matched Western movement models, and obscuring features of postsocialist popular politics in Eastern Europe that fell outside of paradigmatic definitions. When movement instances matching Western models were few, statements of a lack of movement/civil activism in Eastern Europe tended to dismiss the long-term history of social movements in Eastern Europe (Gagyí 2015).

Looking at the present wave of demonstrations, and surrounding political debates, there seems to be a deficit in forms of knowledge on the post-socialist condition that would make it possible to understand local grievances as part of a



simultaneous global history, beyond Cold War and transitological essentializations, or direct applications of Western movements' frames. It could be argued that top-down framing by international and national media coverage, affiliated to respective elite blocs, distorts information on the 'organic' frames of activists. Yet the most visible activism by highly educated people, who make a strong use of social network sites, does not seem to be able to deal with the inherent contradiction in post-socialist narratives and core narratives of 'the crisis of democracy' either. New demonstration slogans pitting Europe vs. Russia, democracy vs. communism, the middle class against lower social strata, civilization vs. backwardness, resonate further in Western oriented activists' attempts to correct local demonstrators' political mindsets and substitute them with those of Western movements. In the recent years, making use of European and German political funds, green, feminist, social-democratic and post-Marxist frameworks have traveled throughout Eastern European activist forums without their basic assumptions, set on a Western background, being significantly questioned from the perspective of Eastern European experience. Instead, internalizing such frameworks worked rather as a type of capital that Eastern activists can deploy to gain some of the recognition and assets available in Western movement infrastructures.

In anthropology, post-socialist studies aimed to make post-socialism a critical standpoint, rather than an area studies problem, and situate the lived realities of post-socialisms vis-à-vis new capitalisms across the globe. While that aim has been served by various scholarly works on post-socialist complexities, the tradition of anthropological studies of post-socialism has not been in the position to influence local understandings of the same situations. The recent boom of SMS in both Western and Eastern European contexts might promise to put new resources at work in order to conceive of local and global movements in a relevant comparative framework. Both traditions might do a lot to help local movements' orientation across the complex geographies of the present global crisis.

If I was to make a comment on what the survival of essentializing notions might suggest for the study of post-socialist movements, it would be the following. Broader ambitions to place socialist and post-socialist development within global history beyond the Cold War framework, as voiced by Chari and Verdery (2009), or Gille (2010), have not been sufficiently addressed. Many case studies on East European movements establish transnational links through analogy, or by the application of theoretical notions which have been developed in other contexts. The wide use of notions such as "democracy", "social movement" or "neoliberalism", with no differentiation between the actual form and function of similar political-ideological elements at different points of the global system stands out as one such case. It seems to me that the systematic problems of self-recognition in post-socialist societies, as they appear in present mobilizations, could benefit largely from available knowledge addressing the former ambition: to situate socialist and post-socialist development in global history, and place lived realities within that. Assessing the impact of 25 years of post-socialist

studies amidst a new geopolitical situation, as social movements and their studies face a long unseen upsurge, bringing that question back to the fore seems one of the tasks ahead for movement-oriented research.

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