

Postsocialisms Unbound: Connections, Critiques, Comparisons

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Over the past twenty years, we have learned a great deal about the ways in which pervasive forces of transformation have enveloped the citizens and states of the former Soviet bloc. The analytic rubric of “postsocialism” has played a crucial role in this body of scholarship by enabling conversation and comparison among diverse studies spread across a massive region of the world. It is increasingly apparent, however, that the salient encounters and transformations of the early twenty-first century are inadequately understood if we limit the scope of our analyses to the geographical boundaries of eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, or even the catchall “Eurasia.” These days, Russia’s private and nationalized oil and gas companies compete around the world in a heavily politicized marketplace of natural resource exploration, consumption, and production. Former Soviet and east European tourists, traders, laborers, and entrepreneurs cycle through the markets of Turkey, western Europe, and more distant destinations. Activists promoting the rights of indigenous peoples draw upon expanding networks that connect Siberia to South America and the Arctic to Africa. The making of kinship connections between westerners and postsocialist citizens—especially marriages and adoptions—continues apace, as do more shadowy global circuits of human trafficking that pass through the former Soviet bloc. The powerful discourses of democratization so omnipresent in the 1990s have moved on to other areas of the world, notably Iraq and the broader Middle East; as they traveled, these discourses—and the experts whose work helps sustain them—have incorporated and built upon the democratizing experiments and experiences of the first postsocialist decade in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

To be sure, none of these processes is entirely new; it does seem, however, that they have grown in scope and intensity over the last decade or so. Indeed, the increasing salience of processes and connections extending *outward from* (rather than simply *into*) postsocialist eastern Europe and

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the former Soviet Union is beginning to receive sustained attention from scholars of various stripes. So, too, are new kinds of critical and comparative projects that insert the study of postsocialisms into an expanding range of debates in social, cultural, and political theory. This introductory essay and the two articles following it suggest that it is, accordingly, time to expand the ways we understand postsocialist transformations, broaden the range of analytic contact points between local/regional postsocialisms and transnational processes, and, along the way, reflect anew on some of our interdisciplinary and international conversations. Grappling with these regional and transnational processes is a project for many disciplines and for many interdisciplinary projects. I focus primarily on anthropology, only one of several fields that is well positioned to advance our understandings of the ways in which scholarship on socialisms and postsocialisms is becoming less and less bound to particular world regions.

Anthropology is still a comparative newcomer to the study of eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and broader Eurasia.¹ Although a steady trickle of ethnographies (mostly based in eastern Europe) appeared in the later socialist period, 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.² The all-encompassing transformations occur-

1. By "anthropology," I mean largely British, American, and French social-cultural anthropology, although agreements, disagreements, and cross-fertilizations between these "western" scholars and ethnographers trained in the region have been a crucial part of the development of the field of postsocialist studies. In the case of Russia, for instance, see Valery A. Tishkov, "The Crisis in Soviet Ethnography," *Current Anthropology* 33, no. 4 (August–October 1992): 371–94 and 34, no. 3 (June 1993): 275–79; Valery A. Tishkov, "U.S. and Russian Anthropology: Unequal Dialogue in a Time of Transition," *Current Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (February 1998): 1–17; and "Cultural Anthropology: The State of the Field," a special issue of *Antropologicheskii Forum/Forum for Anthropology and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2004); for eastern Europe, see Michał Buchowski, "Hierarchies of Knowledge in Central-Eastern European Anthropology," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): 5–14; Petr Skalník, ed., *A Post-Communist Millennium: The Struggles for Sociocultural Anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe* (Prague, 2002); and Chris M. Hann, "Anthropology's Multiple Temporalities and Its Future in Central and Eastern Europe: A Debate" (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Paper No. 90, 2007).

2. For instructive appraisals of the development of the anthropology of east European and Soviet socialisms, see Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996); Chris M. Hann, ed., *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice* (London, 1993); and Joel Martin Halpern and David A. Kideckel, "Anthropology of Eastern Europe," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 12 (1983): 377–402. For some reviews and major statements of anthropologists' work on the postsocialist period, see, for instance, Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*; Chris M. Hann, "After Communism: Reflections on East European Anthropology and the 'Transition,'" *Social Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (October 1994): 229–49; Petra Rethmann, "Chto Delat'?: Ethnography in the Post-Soviet Cultural Context," *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 4 (December 1997): 770–74; Thomas C. Wolfe, "Cultures and Communities in the Anthropology of Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 195–216; Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, "Introduction," in Burawoy and Verdery, eds., *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* (Lanham, Md., 1999); Chris M. Hann, ed., *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002); Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn, "Post-Post-Transition Theories: Walking on Multiple Paths," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37 (2008): 235–50; and Nancy Ries, "Anthropology and Eurasia: Why Culture

ring throughout the region in the 1990s and early 2000s made the everyday lives and predicaments that were most accessible through ethnographic field methods particularly significant domains in which to describe and theorize socialist aftermaths. As these ethnographic studies appeared with increasing frequency over the 1990s, they entered a configuration of scholarly disciplines shaped in good part by the late twentieth-century academy, in which political science and economics were hegemonic due to their role in the Cold War, yet not particularly well equipped (in most anthropologists' view, at any rate) to conceptualize the post-Soviet period as anything other than a unidirectional, even natural, "transition" to capitalism and democracy. Anthropologists' tendency to position their studies against predictions and measurements of a teleological, unidirectional "transition" was, thus, demanded by the on-the-ground experiences accessed through long-term fieldwork and, at the same time, important for establishing an institutional foothold in the study of the region.

So far, so conventional; this story has been told before.³ The collective argument of this *Slavic Review* cluster, however, is that historical moments, disciplinary configurations, and world regions have not stood still in the years since 1989. It is, we suggest, time to add new dimensions to the now well-developed analytic strategy in which various postsocialist contexts serve as sites for debate about how transnational or global processes (from democratization to neoliberalization to religious conversion) have *come to* the former Soviet bloc.⁴ Just as significant, we argue, are other sites, more complex circulations, and understudied vectors of transnational movement that are not bound by the world regions bequeathed to us by Cold War configurations of knowledge and power. The geographical space of Eurasia has been mutable and debatable for the last two decades, as the name changes for National Resource Centers and, most recently, this journal's sponsoring organization, suggest. However labeled, bounded, and rebounded, this space has continued to serve as the assumed ground on which to work out new directions in disciplinary and interdisciplinary

Matters in the Study of Postsocialism," *NewsNet: News of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies* 45, no. 4 (August 2005): 1–5.

3. See, for instance, Katherine Verdery, "Bringing the Anthropologists (Back) In," *NewsNet: News of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2006): 1–11. On broader transformations in the western academy over which the above paragraphs skate briskly, see, for instance, Carl E. Plutsch, "The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, circa 1950–1975," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (October 1981): 565–90; Christopher Simpson, ed., *Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences during the Cold War* (New York, 1998); and Noam Chomsky et al., eds., *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York, 1997).

4. My choice of the phrase "add new dimensions" is quite intentional. I do not wish to be understood as implying that studies based in only one place, or studies that do not take up the kinds of transnational connections or comparisons I focus on here, are somehow outmoded. On the contrary: anthropology without focused, single-site monograph-style ethnographies is, to me at any rate, unimaginable; indeed, these kinds of studies are the absolute precondition for many of the claims I advocate below. My point, rather, is that there are now enough anthropologists working in this part of the world to permit several analytical strategies to be employed at once, each informing different parts of a larger conversation.

scholarship. But what if we saw this region less as a base assumption and more as part of the research question, a question that spills over into other regions and outside a region-based paradigm altogether? Working collectively on this question should, among other things, enable us to engage arenas of scholarship that, to date, our default regionalizing assumptions have hidden from view.

In the sections that follow, I outline three strategies by which anthropologists have begun to extend the study of postsocialisms beyond the boundaries of eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Eurasia. Each of the strategies I discuss extends and continues in productive dialogue with techniques that anthropologists have used to analyze the early postsocialist years. Each is an ideal type, meant to offer one way of carving up a dynamic and quickly expanding field of inquiry; in any one study, the strategies below are likely to coexist, intersect, and supplement each other. Each, finally, assumes the continued centrality of anthropology's distinctive methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, understood broadly to encompass everything from "traditional" long-term participant observation in a particular community to historical ethnography, multi-sited fieldwork, and situated linguistic, textual, visual, or discourse analysis. The challenge as I see it is not to go beyond ethnography but to add a new range of contexts—both empirical and analytic—in which the ethnography of postsocialisms might be situated and to which it might speak. Throughout, I indicate some potential convergences with neighboring disciplines, particularly those that also employ ethnographic methods to approach broader conceptual and theoretical questions.

Reversed Arrows, Complex Circulations

As I have already noted, one of the most common and successful ways in which anthropologists framed their research in the early postsocialist period was by tracing the unintended consequences of programs and policies designed to advance one or another aspect of the transition from socialism. What, these studies have asked, does it mean for citizens and states to encounter the new experts, ideas, commodities, and ways of being that flooded the former socialist world after 1989? In domains from state formation to gender and from privatization to health care, the lived experience of transition was often far from what the experts predicted and, in their policy-generating mode, strove to create. Despite the variety of ethnographic contexts explored in these studies, the overall movement they have traced and analyzed has, however, been largely unidirectional, from west to east.

A rapidly growing number of anthropological studies has extended this line of analysis by exploring additional—often less unidirectional—movements and circulations that reach beyond the region.⁵ A few such studies appeared in the early postsocialist years, many of them situated in cross-border zones where traders and nomads stepped up their move-

5. Alaina Lemon explores this theme under the rubric "Multidirectional Influences" in "Writing against the New 'Cold War,'" *Anthropology News* 49, no. 8 (2008): 11–12.

ments to cope with economic dislocations.⁶ More recent scholarship in this vein stretches much further afield. In her article, for instance, Jennifer Patico follows the movements that attend marriages between women from the former Soviet bloc and American men. Her analysis is firmly rooted in the ethnography of postsocialisms—especially the widespread view, noted by many scholars, that post-Soviet gender relations entered a period of crisis that has yet to subside. But Patico's fieldwork and argument also lead out of the postsocialist world, strictly defined, to explore an interlocking crisis in western gender and kinship regimes. This expanded view enables Patico to chart new terrain in the global political economy of gender, kinship, and sentiment.⁷

This appreciation of movement out of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is not limited to that stemming from the flow of people in wider and wider circuits. Several scholars have focused on the flow of cultural forms and ideas, complicating, contextualizing, and historicizing understandings of the postsocialist period as a time when "western" forms and ideas moved east. One instructive example of this kind of work is Laura Adams's exploration of cultural festivals and spectacles in Uzbekistan.⁸ Arguing against simple theories of cultural imperialism or unidi-

6. For studies of this phenomenon based on ethnography during the early post-socialist years, see Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley, 1999); Chris M. Hann and Ildiko Hann, "Samovars and Sex on Turkey's Russian Markets," *Anthropology Today* 8, no. 4 (June 1992): 3–6; and Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath, *The End of Nomadism? Society, State, and the Environment in Inner Asia* (Durham, 1999). More recently, see, for instance, Leyla Keough, "Globalizing 'Post-socialism': Mobile Mothers and Neoliberalism on the Margins of Europe," *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 431–61; Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, 2006); and, on a somewhat different kind of migration, Melissa L. Caldwell, "Development Migrants in Russia: The Global Movement of Aid, People, and Status," in Deema Kaneff and Frances Pine, eds., *Emerging Inequalities in Europe: Poverty and Transnational Migration* (London, forthcoming).

7. Alaina Lemon's recent work also makes productive use of the ethnography of gendered sentiments and emotions to revisit Cold War assumptions and interpretive frameworks. See, for instance, Alaina Lemon, "Sympathy for the Weary State? Cold War Chronotopes and Moscow Others," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 4 (October 2009): 832–64, and Alaina Lemon, "Hermeneutic Algebra: Solving for Love, Time/Space, and Value in Putin-Era Personal Ads," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (September 2008): 236–67.

8. Laura L. Adams, "Globalization, Universalism, and Cultural Form," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 3 (July 2008): 614–40. For another useful study of ideas flowing in multiple directions, see Johanna Bockman and Michael A. Bernstein, "Scientific Community in a Divided World: Economists, Planning, and Research Priority during the Cold War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 3 (July 2008): 581–613. Examples of this kind of research could easily be multiplied. The spread of religious ideas and practices into the postsocialist world, for instance, has drawn increasing attention from scholars. Catherine Wanner nicely articulates some of the themes I explore here in a recent study of evangelicals in and beyond Ukraine: "When a Nigerian opens a Church in Ukraine that sends Ukrainian believers to the U.S., Germany and elsewhere to save the unsaved and church the unchurched, it is no longer a case of core exerting influence on the periphery. Rather the interconnections and the cultural flow of ideas, objects and people are also significant among non-Western regions and from the so-called Second and Third Worlds to the First"; see Catherine Wanner, "Conversion and the Mobile Self: Evangelicalism as 'Traveling Culture,'" in Matijis Pelkmans, ed., *Conversion after Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms, and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union* (Oxford, 2009),

rectional globalization and expanding her view outside the conventional region of postsocialisms, Adams suggests that the universalist ambitions of modernity have played a key role in shaping both Soviet and post-Soviet public culture in Uzbekistan. She then reaches beyond Uzbekistan to establish that these displays of folkloric and other varieties of “culture” bear important similarities to those in the west in their cultural form; indeed, culture-producing elites in Uzbekistan see their productions as competitors in a global cultural field with numerous vectors of ongoing influence and interaction. Adams’s argument is still rooted in local and regional specificity; it is, for instance, the nonmarket context of Soviet-era festivals in Uzbekistan that enables Adams to effectively challenge the close links among commodification, culture, and globalization assumed in so much scholarship. In a manner similar to Patico, that is, Adams engages a broad and significant arena of contemporary scholarship by positioning specifically postsocialist ethnography within much wider circuits and flows. Whether we are talking about the movement of people, commodities, discourses, ideas, or cultural forms, studies like these alert us to a much wider range of circulations than was the case when our arrows pointed, however crookedly and imperfectly, primarily from west to east.

Critiques of Western Knowledge and Power

For anthropologists and their interdisciplinary interlocutors, a second set of strategies for theorizing postsocialisms in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has involved using these ongoing transformations to reflect critically on western concepts, including those underpinning much of recent social science. Katherine Verdery has been an eloquent proponent of this approach, suggesting, for instance, that common concepts such as “democracy” and “civil society” are more productively understood as contested political symbols than as usefully descriptive of any emergent social or political formation in the postsocialist world.⁹ Her monograph *The Vanishing Hectare* accomplishes a similar task with respect to “property,” using the processes of decollectivization and restitution in Romania to show that property—far from having the taken-for-granted meanings often assumed in the social science literature that informed western advisors and Romanian lawmakers—is better understood as a site of interwoven political, social, and cultural struggles. Property in all of these dimensions, Verdery argues, is made, unmade, and remade in practice; “it” cannot be assumed in advance or thought to take any form “naturally.”¹⁰

In studies adopting this strategy, the unbinding of postsocialisms proceeds not (or not only) through literally tracing the movements of people,

174. See also Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca, 2007), which combines astute historical study with ethnography sited in both Ukraine and the United States to explore the transformations of Baptist communities after the end of socialism.

9. Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*

10. Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania* (Ithaca, 2003).

commodities, ideas, or cultural forms, but by using the experiences of postsocialisms accessed through ethnographic fieldwork to question and critique central assumptions in western social science. These studies, in other words, see the attempt to create markets and democracies in the postsocialist world as interesting, not for whether or to what extent they are actually created, but for the ways in which the very act of trying to create them permits a critique of their assumed universality, transportability, coherence, or desirability. In the present volume, Jessica Greenberg takes up this task by training her attention on nonparticipation in democratic processes in Serbia. Rather than view apathy and indifference as markers of democratic failure, Greenberg approaches them as sites for an alternate politics, one that critiques the perceived inadequacies of democracy and enables many Serbian citizens to evade what they see as the judging eyes of the west. In the course of her argument, Greenberg presents—and allows her Serbian ethnography to speak back to—concepts commonly circulating in the western social science literature on democratization such as Robert Putnam’s “social capital.”¹¹ Theories of democracy and civil society such as Putnam’s, Greenberg asserts, are only able to see Serbian nonparticipation as a failure, as a case that does not live up to their hopes and expectations, and, perhaps, as a source of lessons to be learned as democratizing projects move elsewhere. For all of their popularity, Greenberg concludes, these approaches easily miss the centrality of nonparticipation to postsocialist Serbian politics, discourse, and popular culture—a centrality revealed through ethnography. In fact, it is precisely the hegemony of such concepts of democracy in the hands of European policymakers that is helping to create and spread the politics of nonparticipation in postsocialist Serbia.

As Greenberg’s article makes clear, the relevance and significance of this analytic strategy in the study of postsocialisms has hardly diminished since the days of high transitology in the 1990s. Indeed, Sharad Chari and Verdery have recently proposed a set of research questions and conversations that would link the historical and ethnographic study of postsocialisms to one of the most sustained and productive bodies of critical scholarship in the global academy today: postcolonial studies.¹² In their view, “thinking between the posts” will enable scholars to move beyond many of the disciplinary and regional barriers erected by late twentieth-century-era divisions of knowledge production (especially the “Three Worlds” paradigm) and explore new kinds of connections, comparisons, and critiques. As particularly promising starting points, they suggest the comparative study of empires, the persistence of Cold War representations and processes in both postcolonial and postsocialist contexts, and the techniques of state-sponsored exclusion (especially racisms) that have

11. Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000).

12. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts: Postsocialism, Postcolonialism, and Ethnography after the End of the Cold War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (January 2009): 6–34.

characterized both posts, if often in different ways. Chari and Verdery envision postsocialist studies and postcolonial studies as mutually transformative and generative of a new kind of post–Cold War studies, one that emerges from intersecting epistemological, methodological, topical, and regional convergences and serves as a basis for new critical perspectives tailored to the global transformations of the early twenty-first century.¹³

Situated Comparisons and New Juxtapositions

A rethinking of imperial histories of the sort proposed by Chari and Verdery is not the only vector of comparison that shows significant promise in the broader project of unbinding postsocialisms. Although anthropology as a field embraces both dedicated studies of particular times and places and situated comparisons ranging across time and place—as well as the tension between these two modes—the balance has, to date, often been tipped toward the particular in the study of the former Soviet bloc. There are likely two reasons for this state of affairs. First, new possibilities for ethnographic fieldwork—almost entirely new in the former Soviet Union, somewhat less so in eastern Europe—have combined with the sheer unpredictability of “transition” and the broader disciplinary dynamics described above to highlight ethnography’s unparalleled abilities to render intelligible the convoluted transformations of everyday life under conditions of rapid change. The very nature of the postsocialist period, that is, has contributed to the emphasis placed on ethnography in the anthropology of the region. A side effect of this confluence, however, is that the comparative view sometimes taken by anthropologists and others employing ethnographic methods has received less attention in the study of postsocialisms (it does not, for instance, have a prominent place in the reviews of the field mentioned above).

13. A significant secondary benefit of the kind of conversations that Chari and Verdery propose would be the continued deepening of conversations between historians, anthropologists, and other scholars about the Russian and Soviet empires, including the question of whether or not the Soviet Union can be usefully understood as a colonial power. On the issue of empire alone—far from the only zone for such conversations—see Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev, eds., *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930* (Bloomington, 2007); Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2009); “Locating the (Post-) Colonial in Soviet History,” a special issue, edited by Adeeb Khalid, of *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (December 2007), and Adeeb Khalid, “The Soviet Union as an Imperial Formation: A View from Central Asia,” in Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, 2007), 123–51; Maria Todorova, “Balkanizem in postkolonializem: O lepoti pogleda z letala,” *Zgodovinski Časopis* (Historical review, Ljubljana) 61, nos. 1–2 (2007): 135, 141–55; Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001); Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, 2004). On anthropology and history in the region, see also Douglas Rogers, “Historical Anthropology Meets Soviet History,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 633–49, and Hann, “Anthropology’s Multiple Temporalities.”

A second reason for this relative lack of attention to comparison is that many anthropologists have grown wary of comparative techniques, not only because they often trim away the particularities on which ethnography thrives, but because making any two or more cases commensurable for the purposes of comparison is far from a politically neutral project. To give but one example, comparison, especially modern social scientific comparison, has often been a technology of power used by states and other actors to mold heterogeneous groups into governable polities. Among the first and most eager comparers, as Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan point out, were colonial powers swapping knowledge about how to regulate populations and orchestrate empire.¹⁴ In my view, however, these critiques of comparison should not foreclose the usefulness of comparison any more than critiques of ethnographic fieldwork should end the practice of living in places for a while and asking questions of people. What is required, in both cases, is careful, contextualized research and theory that is aware of and reflects the conditions of its own production and the fields of knowledge and power it seeks to engage. Situated comparisons of this sort have already formed an important dimension of the study of postsocialisms; they stand to make many more useful contributions in years to come, particularly in combination with the strategies of tracing more complex circulations and embarking on new kinds of critical scholarship discussed above.¹⁵

One of the best models for situated comparison comes from the earliest days of the study of postsocialisms: Michael Burawoy's study of Hungarian factory shop-floors, which he compared to Allied, the American

14. Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, "Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains," in Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations*.

15. In particular ethnographies, comparison is often used to highlight the specificities of the case at hand. Verdery's *Vanishing Hectare*, for instance, includes an entire chapter on the course of property reform across the former Soviet bloc as part of her effort to situate the case on which the book focuses and to indicate the ways in which her conclusions may or may not be generalizable. Comparison within the region has also been a favorite technique, often in edited collections juxtaposing different ethnographic contexts. See especially Burawoy and Verdery, eds., *Uncertain Transition*; Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey, eds., *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism* (Oxford, 2002); Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland, eds., *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor, 2000); Hann, ed., *Postsocialism*; Rubie S. Watson, *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism* (Sante Fe, 1994); Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, eds., *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism* (Princeton, 2000); Hermine G. De Soto and David G. Anderson, eds., *The Curtain Rises: Rethinking Culture, Ideology, and the State in Eastern Europe* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1993). As I note below, only the volumes edited by Hann and Watson in this list stretch their comparative scope beyond the former Soviet bloc—to China in both cases. Notable among the existing comparisons that stretch still farther is Robert Hayden's thought-provoking comparison of "antagonistic tolerance" at religious shrines in India and the Balkans and its implications for theories of democracy and tolerance; see Robert M. Hayden, "Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans," *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (April 2002): 205–31. On the utility of comparison in the future of postsocialist studies, see also Don Kalb, "Afterword: Globalism and Postsocialist Prospects," in Hann, ed., *Postsocialism*.

factory in which he had worked in the 1970s and that led to his *Manufacturing Consent*.¹⁶ The careful comparison of “relations in production” in these two factories led Burawoy, writing with Hungarian scholar János Lukács, to challenge a series of “mythologies of industrial work” that emphasized differences between socialism and capitalism at the expense of complexities and unexpected similarities. Burawoy and Lukács’s insistence that comparisons between socialism and capitalism must juxtapose actual practice in both systems (as opposed to the practice of one and the ideology of the other) was, given the difficulties of data collection in the former Soviet bloc and the ideological fixities of the Cold War, novel at the time of publication. Since then, this dictum has become both more possible and more commonplace in the literature on postsocialisms, whether as explicit, developed comparative project or implicit framing for largely noncomparative research.¹⁷

Working in very different ethnographic contexts and in an entirely different area of social and cultural theory than Burawoy and Lukács, for instance, Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak have recently turned their attention to the “uncanny kinship” between late socialist and late liberal media conditions and styles of politically charged satire.¹⁸ They begin with the late socialist parodic style of *stiob*, defined in Yurchak’s earlier work as, “a form of [late Soviet] irony . . . that required such a degree of *over-identification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”¹⁹ *Stiob*, Yurchak argued, was largely a creation of the particular linguistic and performative conditions of late socialism, in which political language and speech became “hypernormalized”—characterized chiefly by endlessly repeated, recombined, and recursive phrases significant for their form rather than their content. In “American *Stiob*” Boyer and Yurchak suggest that hypernormalization and its overidentified parody may not be exclusively creatures of the late Soviet period. One of the most frequent targets of *The Daily Show*’s humorous video montages, to cite but one of the authors’ examples, is what host Jon Stewart sometimes calls “political theater”: the sound bites and other standardized discursive forms that parade through 24-hour cable news networks with scant attention paid to any actual political content, traditionally understood.

16. Michael Burawoy and János Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism* (Chicago, 1992); Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capital* (Chicago, 1979).

17. Two studies that make excellent use of this brand of comparative framing to situate their own detailed ethnographies are Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca, 2004); and Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington, 2007).

18. Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, “American *Stiob*: Or, What Late Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Teach Us about Contemporary Political Culture in the West” (unpublished manuscript, Rice University and University of California, Berkeley, 2009).

19. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 249–50 (emphasis in the original).

Boyer and Yurchak note three factors in the contemporary western political/media environment that have created conditions of “hypernormalization” quite similar to those of late socialism—even in the absence of a centralized propaganda machine: the concentration of content production in the face of declining profits for many media organizations; the temporal speed-up of newsrooms and the associated preference for being first rather than reporting complexities and nuances; and the increasing institutional and practical interconnectedness of media organizations, who constantly monitor and seek to outdo their competitors’ newscasts and Web sites and, if not intentionally, find their forms converging in the process. Here, as in the case of Burawoy and Lukács’s much earlier and much different study, the strategy of exploring situated and provocative comparisons between late socialist and contemporary American (and more broadly “western”) contexts yields new perspectives on both cases and new ways to advance important conversations across social and cultural theory.²⁰

Similar opportunities derive from ethnographically driven comparisons that juxtapose or explore the connections among socialist and post-socialist societies around the world. There are, for instance, growing bodies of scholarship that use the “classical” socialisms and postsocialisms of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as a foil for productive interventions in scholarship based on other regions and contexts: Alena Ledeneva has extended her own ethnographic studies of informal economic practices in Russia to an instructive comparison with China; Kelly M. Askew and M. Anne Pitcher argue that the analytic rubric of postsocialism is better suited to much of Africa than the more common—and less historically contextualized—neoliberalism; P. Sean Brotherton’s ethnography of health care and the socialist state in Cuba’s special period relies in part on theories of state-citizen relationships first explored in China and Russia; and the flourishing anthropology of China is, among many other things, a site for illuminating debate about the very applicability of the term *postsocialist* to contemporary East Asian contexts.²¹ Future com-

20. Susan Gal and Gail Kligman’s situated comparison of the politics of gender after socialism is another recent and important contribution to this strategy of unbinding postsocialisms; see Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay* (Princeton, 2000). In their analysis, highly gendered discourses, such as those about the family in postsocialist contexts being a traditional constant in a rapidly changing world, come into much sharper analytic focus when they are juxtaposed with discourses about the family in western European welfare states and the United States (where many see the family as “in crisis”). In the course of their analysis, Gal and Kligman also offer an additional useful framework for situating particular ethnographic and historical studies in larger contexts: the fractal, in which distinctions and shapes are reproduced recursively at several levels of analysis. As Greenberg’s analysis in this issue suggests, the fractal offers a potentially new and distinct strategy for unbinding postsocialisms that deserves wider attention.

21. Alena Ledeneva, “Blat and Guanxi: Informal Practices in Russia and China,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 1 (January 2008): 118–44; M. Anne Pitcher and Kelly M. Askew, “African Socialisms and Postsocialisms,” *Africa* 76, no. 1 (2006): 1–14 (see also the subsequent articles in this thematic issue of *Africa*); P. Sean Brotherton, “We Have to Think Like Capitalists but Continue Being Socialists”: Medicalized Subjectivities, Emer-

parative studies might begin to mine and extend this kind of literature to generate still further insights. The comparative study of diverse socialisms and postsocialisms, for instance, should offer promising ways to reformulate theories of global capitalism that impute more homogeneity and universality to “neoliberalism” than it deserves.

All of the comparisons I have summarized, cited, and advocated here share two characteristics. First, they are grounded in situated, contextualized ethnography, either in their own presentation of new research material or in their summary and redeployment for new analytic purposes of ethnography originally published elsewhere. Second, they are united in their rejection of a brand of comparison that has been central to transitology, in this region and elsewhere in the world: comparison that ranks different postsocialist countries along externally derived and allegedly universal metrics of, for instance, freedom, corruption, marketization, or the development of civil society. The studies I discuss here, however widely they range, set aside such yardsticks in favor of using comparison to sharpen the significance of the case at hand or to make a broader set of theoretical or critical interventions on a particular topic.

These points are significant in the study of the former Soviet bloc because they offer a way to bridge one of the main cleavages that beset early studies of the postsocialist world—a cleavage that has been superseded in practice for some time, but, to my knowledge, has not been specifically understood as such. In the 1990s, one of the chief axes of debate in the study of the region was between area studies/contextual knowledge and the universalizing ambitions of some corners of western social science.²² In this debate, anthropologists often found themselves and their ethnographies on the particularizing/contextualizing side, arguing against what they saw as decontextualized comparisons that could be easily rejected on the grounds that they paid scant attention to lived realities and par-

gent Capital, and Socialist Entrepreneurs in Post-Soviet Cuba,” *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2 (May 2008): 259–74; Andrew Kipnis, *China and Postsocialist Anthropology: Theorizing Power and Society after Communism* (Norwalk, Conn., 2008); and Frank N. Pieke, “Introduction: A Chinese Century in Anthropology?” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no. 1 (February 2009): 1–8. Even within anthropology alone, this literature rapidly becomes daunting in its scope and diversity, but see also Helen F. Siu, “China’s Century: Fast-Forward with Historical Baggage,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 2 (June 2006): 389–92; Kesha Fikes and Alaina Lemon, “African Presence in Former Soviet Spaces,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 497–524; Melissa Caldwell, “Food Relief in Russia: The Global Politics of Race and World Status” (unpublished manuscript, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2008); Donald Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley, 1999). Also diagnostic of this emerging field of inquiry is the recent translation of classical texts in the study of eastern European socialisms into Chinese: see, for instance, Iván Szélenyi, *Essays on Socialism, Post-Communism, and the New Class* (Beijing, 2009).

22. For one exchange on whether approaches to “the transition” should be based in area studies scholarship or universalizing assumptions and large-scale comparisons about shifts from authoritarianism to democracy, see Philippe C. Schmitter with Terry Lynn Karl, “The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Attempt to Go?” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 173–85; and Valerie Bunce, “Should Transitologists Be Grounded?” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 111–27.

ticularities of postsocialism and were, therefore, simply inaccurate. This situation both drew on and contributed to the centrality of detailed ethnography to the early postsocialist anthropology of the region mentioned above. In the broader project of unbinding postsocialisms, however, we can see a wider role for comparison that works *through* ethnography and other kinds of contextualizing research, yet does not slip into a priori universalisms or metrics. There should be room in this strategy not only for anthropologists and others who employ ethnographic methods but for those theoretically oriented political scientists who continue to insist on the important of contextual, situated knowledge.²³

The term *postsocialisms*, some have suggested, is fast approaching its expiration date—or perhaps has already passed it. With large segments of the populations of the former Soviet bloc having no personal experience of socialism, this argument often runs, continuing to use this term runs the risk of missing new developments and transformations in the region. As the lifeworlds to which ethnography attends move on—perhaps into a new global era of neoliberal capitalism—our terminology should shift as well. Although I do not disagree that the former Soviet bloc of the early twenty-first century differs in significant and substantial ways from the years in which the study of postsocialisms was born, there are several reasons to think that the term *postsocialisms* can still do useful work.

In the first place, postsocialism has never referred exclusively to experiential lifeworlds, and so changes in these lifeworlds should not necessarily warrant jettisoning the broader analytic device. As I have indicated, postsocialism has also been, for instance, an important rubric for critiquing fundamental concepts in western social science and a banner for institutionalizing new and vibrant kinds of scholarship (both in the western academy and in the formerly Soviet bloc). Crucially, a great deal of scholarship on postsocialisms has actually included new approaches to the *socialist* and even *presocialist* periods; this continues to be the case even in very recent studies.²⁴ Whether or not postsocialist studies and post-colonial studies merge in the fashion Chari and Verdery advocate, there

23. Early disputes between anthropology and political science took place in a context in which anthropology sought to gain an institutional traction in this part of the world just as political science grappled anew with its overall commitment to area studies and the scientificity and universality of its methods and claims. This context likely helps account for some of the more heated polemical debates that attended the emergence of the anthropology of postsocialisms. Now that the intensity of this moment has begun to fade, I hope there is room for more substantial and constructive engagement among anthropologists and political scientists of the region. My thanks to Venelin Ganev (both in person and in his instructive writings) for pushing me to think about these points; see, for instance, Venelin I. Ganev, "The 'Triumph of Neoliberalism' Reconsidered: Critical Remarks on Ideas-Centered Analyses of Political and Economic Change in Post-Communism," *East European Politics and Societies* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 343–78, and Venelin I. Ganev, *Preying on the State: The Transformation of Bulgaria after 1989* (Ithaca, 2007).

24. See, for instance, Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*; Grant, *The Captive and the Gift*; and Douglas Rogers, *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals* (Ithaca, 2009).

is no reason to think that postsocialisms should refer narrowly to the on-the-ground experience of living through the 1990s any more than post-colonialism concerns itself narrowly with the experience of living through the first decade and a half of independence from European rule. Indeed, as the experiential elements of early postsocialisms fade somewhat—at least for some kinds of studies—it seems that the critical, analytic, and theoretical dimensions of postsocialisms might come more sharply into focus, both for scholars long dedicated to the region and for those who previously had little interest in what happened after Soviet socialism.

Second, there is the matter of the adequacy of the various candidates vying to replace postsocialisms in our vocabulary. Aside from the post-Cold War studies proposed by Chari and Verdery, most suggestions hinge (often by default, it seems) on merging postsocialist studies into the global study of neoliberal capitalisms—a major area of concern in anthropology today. In their call for scholarship on African socialisms and postsocialisms, Pitcher and Askew offer an excellent reason not to do this. In their view, many Africanists rushed far too quickly to the study of neoliberalism, fixating upon its common subthemes of free markets, structural adjustment, and massive privatization. In the process, Pitcher and Askew suggest, scholars neglected what was particular about many African states: their socialist histories and postsocialist presents. (It would be ironic indeed if Africanists embraced the study of postsocialisms just as scholars working in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union declared postsocialism over.)²⁵ This point might be made another way as well. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has so powerfully argued for an earlier era of capitalist expansion, one of the ways capital works is by effacing histories outside itself, by transforming all histories into the history of an inevitable capitalist present.²⁶ Although using the term *neoliberalism* in scholarly analysis does not, of course, necessarily indicate complicity in a new round of this process of silencing noncapitalist pasts, it seems to me that important arenas of reflection and critique that have animated the study of postsocialisms stand to be lost if we see formerly socialist parts of the world as just more examples of neoliberalism.

Finally, the urge to look for a successor concept to postsocialisms is only one way to frame the future of scholarship on this and other parts of the world. In this introduction, for instance, I have looked less to temporal progressions than to spatial reconfigurations, to the questions that come into focus if we retain socialisms and postsocialisms as umbrella concepts but unbind them from the geographical confines of eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, or Eurasia. From this perspective, the fact that the immediate experience of living in the wake of socialism seems to be waning in the former Soviet bloc might be taken not as a crisis for our field of study but as one ethnographic data point, a data point that is productively placed alongside other socialist and postsocialist temporali-

25. Pitcher and Askew, "African Socialisms and Postsocialisms."

26. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

ties around the world in pursuit of answers to still larger questions (about, for instance, the multisited, multitemporal workings of global capital). This, then, would be an approach to contemporary capitalism that proceeds through the study of postsocialisms, rather than abandoning it for a generalized neoliberalism. It has taken a great deal of collective time and effort to set the stage for the conversations about socialisms and postsocialisms among scholars of East Asia, South Asia, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere that have been taking place of late. It may well be that unbinding postsocialisms in the ways I have suggested here is a first stage in discarding the rubric altogether. In terms of building scholarly institutions and networks, however, at the very least, it seems premature to jettison postsocialisms before the still emerging conversations about global connections, critiques, and comparisons have had a chance to fully thrash out the issue themselves.