



History, Geography and Difference in the Post-socialist World: Or, Do We Still Need Post-Socialism?

Alison Stenning

School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK;
alison.stenning@ncl.ac.uk

Kathrin Hörschelmann

Department of Geography, University of Durham, Durham, UK;
kathrin.horschelmann@durham.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper seeks to build on ongoing work in east central Europe and the former Soviet Union—in geography and beyond—to think through the conceptualisation of post-socialism. The rationale for this is threefold. Firstly, we see a need to understand post-socialist conditions as they are lived and experienced by those in the region. Secondly, we seek to challenge the persistent tendency to marginalise the experiences of the non-western world in a discourse of globalisation and universalisation. Thirdly, we identify a need to ask how the conditions of post-socialism reshape our theorising more widely. Centring our analysis on history, geography and difference, we review a wide range of perspectives on the socialist and post-socialist, but argue for a strategic essentialism that recognises post-socialist difference without eclipsing differences. In outlining how we might understand history, geography and difference in post-socialism, we draw on key theorisations from post-colonialism (such as the articulation of the post- with the pre-, the relationship to the west, the rethinking of histories/categories, the end of the post) and outline post-socialisms that are partial and not always explanatory but nevertheless important.

Keywords: post-socialism, history, geography, difference

Introduction

With the accession of 10 post-socialist states to the European Union and the steady approach of the twentieth anniversary of the events of 1989, we hear more and more calls for the end of post-socialism. In this paper, we argue that these calls are premature and misplaced, and that there is an urgent need to centre our analytical attention on post-socialism *before it is too late*, before any notion of post-socialist difference is subsumed, without question, into our broader discussions of capitalism and globalisation. Whilst recent years have seen some explicit and critical engagement with the post-socialist, its meanings and the

work it is made to do (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Flynn and Oldfield 2006; Hann 2002; Holmes 1997, 2001; Hörschelmann 2002; Outhwaite and Ray 2005; Sakwa 1999a; Staniszki 2001; Stenning, 2005a, 2005b; Verdery 1996), the conversation remains hesitant and erratic.

The aim of this paper is to build on some of this recent work and to extend that conversation. We do not aim to create an inventory of post-socialism nor to produce a singular conceptualisation based on our own empirical experiences, but to ask how and where we might identify the post-socialist and if and why we might want to do that. In the places where we have rehearsed these questions before—at conferences, in seminars and in more casual conversations—perspectives often reflect geographies of knowledge production, in two distinct ways: the location of the researcher's fieldwork and the researcher's national and institutional location. In particular, geographers and other social scientists based in the post-socialist world have been more reluctant to employ and engage with post-socialism conceptually. As two geographers based in UK institutions researching in neighbouring central European countries, our contribution to this debate is necessarily partial, a recognition that reinforces our insistence that this paper be seen as a particular intervention and as a call for further debate.

For us, there are two key concerns: firstly, conceptualising geographical difference, both within the post-socialist world and between the post-socialist world and the rest/the west; and secondly, understanding the past, to account for the shaping of post-socialism by the socialist past without falling into the (related) traps of either determinism or historicism. These two concerns are inherently connected—infusing concepts of the past with difference allows for plural histories and geographies, whilst employing but problematising the past in our understandings of today allows us to account for at least some of the difference (geographical and otherwise) of the post-socialist world. These articulations highlight, however, that this is a fine line. It is all too easy to trip into essentialism, historicism and determinism whilst insisting on difference. This concern lies at the heart of our paper and our conversations about post-socialism in recent years.

Sakwa (1999a:125) suggests that post-communism “is part of a larger group of ‘post’ philosophies reflecting the uncertainties of our age”. This paper acknowledges the work already done within this “larger group of philosophies” and seeks to explore post-socialism in this light, using ideas and frameworks from post-colonialism to work through the tricky conceptualisation of history, geography and difference. To be clear, we do not see post-socialism as a variant of post-colonialism (though acknowledge that others do), but instead seek to use post-colonial approaches as heuristic tools for exploring post-socialism. Within this framework, we develop eight points which we use to construct a post-socialism which is open and plural, and mark the terrain

for a discussion of methodologies for post-socialism (Hörschelmann and Stenning forthcoming).

Why a Theorised Post-Socialism?

This paper interrogates the conditions of post-socialism and the need for a theorisation of post-socialism. The rationale for this is three-fold. Firstly, within studies of the post-socialist world we see a need to work harder to understand post-socialist conditions as they are lived and experienced by those in the region and to ask what shapes post-socialism. This leads us to our second framing concern—the persistent tendency to marginalise the experiences of the non-western world in a discourse of globalisation. These two together shape the third claim: the necessity to ask how the conditions of post-socialism reshape our theorising more widely.

Lived Post-Socialisms

Sixteen years after 1989, there have been myriad accounts of change in east central Europe and the former Soviet Union, reflecting the challenges of the so-called triple transition (Offe 1991)—the reform of economic structures (eg Pickles and Smith 1998; Pollert 1999); the construction of democratic institutions (eg Ferge 1996; Kaldor and Vejvoda 1997); and the remaking of international relationships (eg Bradshaw and Lynn 1994; Swain and Hardy 1998). In more recent years, however, there has been a growing body of research—largely anthropological, sociological and geographical—which seeks to document, analyse and theorise the ways in which people and communities within the post-socialist world live with, make sense of, and resist the larger political and economic processes of transformation (see, amongst a range of others, Berdahl, Bunzl and Lampland 2000; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Caldwell 2004; Dunn 2004; Hann 2002; Humphrey 2002; Mandel and Humphrey 2002). In this work, attention is shifted from the “transition” and to “actually-existing post-socialism”¹ in an attempt to document and account for the everyday experiences of post-socialism, to ask what difference it makes to live in the post-socialist world.

Globalisation, Neoliberalism and the Place of Difference

Documenting and interrogating the nature of difference connects to broader concerns with the place of difference in the ubiquitous geographies of globalisation, neoliberalism and westernisation. Firstly, there is a concern that literatures on the contemporary geographies of globalisation are partial and often problematic in their treatment of peripheral, largely non-western places. Nagar et al (2002:260) have

drawn attention to a set of “key exclusions in the globalisation literature” which tends to focus on advanced, urban economies and occasionally their “reach and networks” (ibid:265) in the non-west. They argue that, even when their scope includes parts of the non-west, many of these literatures “continue to construct the south and deindustrialized places in the north as the passive, victimized, or invisible ‘other’ to global spaces and processes” (ibid:265). Such a marginalisation locates the non-west as not only subordinate, but also powerless within an omnipotent global capitalism. It writes out difference by reducing the non-west to a space proscribed by capitalism and driven by powerful tendencies of universalisation.²

Secondly, in attributing to such large parts of the world a passive role, this process of marginalisation encourages a perspective which sidelines work produced in/of non-western places and/or by non-western (or even non-Anglo-American) researchers. As Robinson (2003:278) has argued, work in the west is seen “as generative of theoretical and general geographical knowledge” whilst “different contexts have usually been incorporated as add-on ‘case studies’” which are seen only to interpret or affirm existing western knowledge, rather than challenge, contest or develop it. Moreover, theories generated outside the west are seen to have limited use or explanatory power beyond their point of origin. Thus “some ideas are ‘attached’ intimately to the places in which they originate while others circulate freely without attachment to specific places” (Berg 2004:553). Those freely circulating ideas are seen to have “international import, while others simply provide a better understanding of local spaces” (ibid:554). We see, therefore, a “hierarchically organised set of geographical theories and ideas” (ibid:556) in which there is a “belief that the UK and US theories . . . are valid in another country until proven otherwise” (Aalbers 2004:320), whilst other theories are seen as limited, parochial and only local.³

There is a clear connection here to broader debates, within post-colonial and post-structural frameworks, over the politics and geographies of knowledge production (Simonsen 2002), and through this connection, we come to our final concern—that, in many of these important and powerful critiques, the focus has been on restating the place and difference of the global south, the post-colonial world, places “outside Europe” (Robinson 2003:280) and this has then worked to the exclusion of more marginal spaces—of research and of the academy—*within* Europe (Stenning 2005c). It has fallen instead to numerous continental European geographers to draw attention to the overwhelming predominance of British geography in the European spheres of western geography (Aalbers 2004; Domański 2004a, 2004b; Simonsen 2002; Timár 2004a, 2004b).

Timár and Domański note the scripting of east central Europe on the margins of both the global economy and the geographies of knowledge

production. Within this context, the dominant discourse claims that “the core can learn little from the periphery so that local knowledge and experience from CEE is irrelevant” (Domański 2004b:378). In the immediate post-1989 period, Timár suggests that both academic and policy circles were characterised by the validation of western knowledge, *because it is western*, to the exclusion of knowledgeable local researchers and the marginalisation of local experiences. There have, Timár argues, been recent moves towards more collaborative projects, but these still tend to fall into what she calls the “western (basically Anglo-American) theories—eastern empirical studies scenario” (Timár 2004a:535), with the eastern partners expected to contribute little beyond empirical detail for the westerner to theorise (and/or to squeeze into their existing theorisations). This situation is structured both by past exclusions⁴ and by a continuing marginalisation from the spaces of geographical knowledge production, through restricted participation in the circuits of conferences and publications (writing, editing and refereeing).

Social Theory and the Conditions of Post-Socialism

That work outside the core is so rarely seen to be influential in the development of geographical theory creates a challenge for thinking through what the consequences of events in east central Europe and the former Soviet Union, and interpretations of those events, might mean for social theory in the post-Cold War world. Often the experiences of the post-socialist world are invoked by students of the west (and also the south) in a fairly cursory manner, not to understand post-socialism and its relation to other processes of change, but to support a more general point, most likely about neoliberalism (Hörschelmann 2002). In doing this, writers elsewhere acknowledge the critical importance of events in the post-socialist world but rely on quite formulaic interpretations of those events and their meanings.

What we, and others, are suggesting is that more attention be paid to “how existing debates can be re-invigorated and developed by seriously embracing issues raised by the postcommunist condition” (Outhwaite and Ray 2005:vii). For Outhwaite and Ray in their *Social Theory and Postcommunism*, as much as offering challenges to theorisation within the region, the post-communist condition raises questions for our understanding of the social, including concepts of class, solidarity, modernity, civil society, identity and the state (amongst others; see also Patico and Caldwell 2002).

For many, including Outhwaite and Ray, Burawoy, and Sakwa, the posting of socialism also opens grand questions about alternatives to capitalism and “the universal dilemmas posed by the collapse of the revolutionary socialist challenge to the hegemony of capitalism” (Sakwa 1999b:713; see also Sakwa 1999a). It creates challenges for

theorizing the limits of global capitalism (Burawoy 2001) and for documenting, exploring and theorizing the interplay of “homogeneity and particularity” (Outhwaite and Ray 2005:19) in a globalizing, post-socialist world. These questions are reinforced by arguments that the collapse of communism in east central Europe and the former Soviet Union has led not only to transformations in that region but also to “parallel and linked post-socialist restructurings occurring in the non-state socialist world” (Pickles 2004:4). This kind of engagement speaks also to debates around the global refiguring of a left politics after socialism, as in Fraser’s (1997) “postsocialist politics”. In many ways, then, “we are all postcommunist now” (Sakwa 1999b:713; see also Outhwaite and Ray 2005:24). Post-socialism can, thus, be seen not just as a chronological periodisation but as epistemological too (cf Hall 1996).

What Kind of Theory?

Notwithstanding recent claims for the end of transition, the conceptualisation of post-socialism has attracted considerable attention of late, with a number of book-length treatments (Hann 2002; Holmes 1997; Kennedy 2002; Outhwaite and Ray 2005; Sakwa, 1999a) outlining the tentative contours of this condition. Each of these authors set themselves different tasks and come to the project of post-socialism⁵ from different disciplinary and geographical backgrounds (though all are westerners writing about the east). These varied attempts to think through the post-socialist reflect key questions about the nature of theory and the “discipline” of post-socialist studies itself. As many of the authors themselves note, the scale of post-socialism is vast—incorporating more than 25 states and any number of sub-foci across at least economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, business and management, law, history and, of course, geography. Any attempt to produce a single, and singular, theoretical framework for this diverse space would be doomed to failure, and this is probably a good thing. It is no wonder, then, that most writers have been much more modest in their aims, focusing on their disciplinary specialism, on a particular concept or on more abstracted social theoretical planes, all of which enable a strategic use of evidence.

Our approach here is similarly limited and, whilst it borrows at various times from all of these different approaches and literatures, it perhaps most closely echoes the work of Chris Hann and his co-authors in trying to derive productive conceptual and theoretical questions from ongoing ethnographic work in the region. Our focus has been less on the macro-scale institutions of political and economic cores, than on the everyday, grounded “emergent formations that the core is unable, or unwilling, to see” (Kennedy 2002:11), in an echo of Katz’s minor theory (1996). Thus, we build on these everyday experiences to develop not so much a

framework or a model of post-socialism, but a challenge or an agenda for further debate, theoretical, methodological (Hörschelmann and Stenning forthcoming), or otherwise.

Difference During Socialism

As the Second World or Soviet bloc during the post-war period (and before for the Soviet Union), the difference of socialist states—from the west and the south—was largely accepted. The political imagination of the world identified three separate, if interrelated, worlds within which political systems, economic structures and socio-cultural lives were vastly different. The “three worlds” of First, Second and Third, for all their hierarchical spatialities, at least recognised the existence of more than one world. The Second World worked to another logic, imposed or adopted in line with a different set of political and economic imperatives and was thus conceived, in the most extreme cases, as fundamentally different and, at the same time, internally monolithic. Alongside this geopolitical imagination, academic study of the region tended to be separated from the “mainstream” in a vast new academic discipline—Sovietology—often expanded in the service, directly or indirectly, of the state (Cox 1998; Fleron and Hoffman 1993; Unger 1998).

It was perhaps only the worst versions of Sovietology that constructed the region as homogenous and entirely cut off from the rest of the world, materially and conceptually, but these were nevertheless important critiques laid at Sovietology’s feet. For many, the desire to identify the totalitarian Stalinist state obscured the diverse realities of life in the vast Soviet bloc. Yet even without taking into consideration the later revisionist accounts of everyday Stalinism (eg Fitzpatrick 2001; Kotkin 1997), the region was characterised by a variety of geographies of socialism, overdetermined by relationships with Moscow and Comecon, positions of centrality and peripherality, the so-called nationalities question, local political and ideological debates, the role of non-Party organisations (such as the church) and myriad other social, economic, political and cultural formations. Whilst the overwhelming commitment to an explanatory framework of totalitarianism obscured difference within, it also overlooked connections to the west. Sovietologists were seen to “set the Soviet Union [and eastern Europe] apart from other countries” (Burawoy 1992:778). In doing this, Sovietologists exacerbated their marginalisation from “mainstream” social science and “cut themselves off from developments in other areas of social science” (ibid).

In these and many other ways, the east, the Soviet bloc, was constructed as the west’s other—largely homogenous, monolithic, totalitarian and pan-Slavonic—with Cold War geopolitics reinforcing an earlier “invention of eastern Europe” (Wolff 1996). These imaginations

were tied up with a marked teleology of progress, which connected the division of Europe to the passage of the industrial revolution in the west and encouraged a vision of the east as lagging. Todorova (1997) convincingly argues that the Balkans and other parts of east central Europe were simultaneously constructed as both of and beyond Europe, an other not wholly removed from the European self, a representation embodied in the construction of these regions as a bridge or crossroads between east and west, which flows through concepts of the lands in between (Croan 1989), the Second World, a Wallersteinian semi-periphery (Bradshaw and Lynn 1994). These multifaceted inventions of eastern Europe persisted and developed to be “recycled, celebrated and deployed in the age of the Cold War” (Wolff 1996:365) with an ease which reflected quite how well established they were in academic, policy and popular arenas.

This process of othering was increasingly weakened during the late socialist period, not only by the aforementioned revisionist histories of Stalinism, but also by two quite distinct voices—the so-called convergence school of the 1960s and 1970s (Lane 1978; see also Outhwaite and Ray 2005) and a particular strata of central European dissident intellectuals proclaiming the loss (or theft) of central Europe from the west (see, for example, Kundera 1984; Milosz 1989; see also Kumar 1992; Schöpflin and Wood 1989). The convergence theorists argued for an apparent drawing together of communist and capitalist worlds in an evolution towards a single form of industrialism which reflected both the extension of the interventionist state in the west and (broadly defined) marketisation in the east, and which could be identified across a range of political, economic and social spheres, from the nature of work, to the place of the urban and the role of the family, for example. The dangers of such an analysis, however, are clear—in essence, rather than seeing a double convergence, much of this work was founded on a common, stageist and historicist trajectory of modernity, better characterized as modernization or westernization than convergence.⁶ The central European intellectuals argued that their part of Europe was a forgotten part of the west; for Kundera (1984) in his (in)famous article it was “the kidnapped west”. Yet for most of these writers, the return of central Europe to the west rested on an act of line drawing, repudiating its more eastern neighbours on the basis of largely cultural claims to Europe, and there have been numerous critiques of this perspective (Croan 1989; Garton Ash 1989).

Transition and the End of Difference

In different ways, all these theorists encouraged a re-engagement between east and west and set the scene, knowingly or unknowingly, for the dominant discourse of transition—what Outhwaite and Ray (2005:3)

identify as “the whole telos of postcommunist transition . . . a return to ‘Europe’ and to ‘normality’”, transfixed on the end of difference.

There are a number of versions of this approach, which both contradict and complement each other. Perhaps the most striking narrative rests on the defeat of communism and the final triumph of capitalism, a twin process which brings both east and west together in the competitive world of capitalism. The orthodox version of this—which dominates within so-called “transitology”—expects the east to shape up and play the game, and be judged with the west since “there is no alternative”. The more oppositional version also locates the east within the globalised, capitalist world, but stresses its position as subordinate and powerless (Kideckel 2002). Both use capitalism as the key organising framework—establishing little conceptual difference between east and west—and instead focus on the empirical differences between (and within) east and west. Both can frequently be reductionist, but the latter (the more oppositional version) does importantly document the price of transition. Both these perspectives are reinforced by a continuation of the “return to Europe” narrative. Within and beyond the region, transition has been recast as a return to a stolen, European and capitalist, past (Lagerspetz 1999). Whilst founded so centrally on the erasure of east/west difference, this perspective is nevertheless predicated on the reinscription of division within the former east (Kuus 2004; Moisio 2002). Such a contention is also critiqued by economic and social historians who counter any notion of a “return to normalcy” with historical accounts which highlight the longstanding differences between east and west (Berend nd).

Within orthodox “transitology”, there lies another historical trap—of historicism and the reduction of difference (social, cultural, geographical) to time. Within this body of work, the end of post-socialism, and thus of post-socialist difference, is linked to the apparent “end of transition”, a moment marked by completion of the technocratic tasks of political and economic reforms and by the accession of 10 former Soviet bloc countries to the European Union. With these two moments, the rationale for studying these states and their societies as “different” disappears. Instead the focus centres on exploring how these states face “common challenges with the rest of the world” (Lavigne, cited in Brown 1999) and studying them “in the same terms as one would study the relatively developed countries of Western Europe” (Editors’ Introduction 1999:i).

Yet, the attempt to study the post-socialist world “in the same terms” as the west and benchmarked against western norms (formally and informally) positions them as “much further behind” (ibid) and reveals the modernising foundations of this approach. Difference is reduced to relative backwardness and these states are perpetually deemed to be “catching up” in both material and institutional terms. Such a historicist perspective, which reduces geographical diversity to a lagging

temporality, is not new, either in studies of the post-socialist world or accounts of the non-western world more generally (Burawoy 1992; Chakrabarty 2000). Within this kind of framework, we see the recurrence of the idea that the region is on a journey somewhere.⁷ The transition recalls the earlier historical positioning of the region as “in between” east and west, a notion which not only redeploys the teleological construction of progress from east to west but also embeds the teleology (spatial and temporal) itself, focusing attention once again on the future and the west (then and there) rather than on the here and now of post-socialist Europe. In all of these ways, the diversity, depth and scale of the region’s particular histories and geographies are erased as they become (just like) the west.

Too Much Difference

In contrast (yet at the same time strangely allied) to these perspectives is an approach which downplays the conceptual validity of post-socialism through an analysis of divergence rather than convergence. For proponents of this perspective, the evident diversity of life across the Soviet bloc has only been reinforced by the transformations since 1989/91. “Convergence” accounts tend to be found in the more western parts of the region and as such often ignore the more divergent experiences of more distant parts of the former Soviet empire.

Even an offhand consideration—in both statistical and ethnographic data—of the 28 states which were formerly part of the Soviet Union or its European satellites highlights a wide variety of social, political, economic and cultural forms, with fractures at multiple scales. We commonly see distinctions between the former Soviet Union and the countries of east central Europe, between the “European” former Soviet states of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus and their more eastern counterparts, between central Europe and the Balkan states, still in the EU waiting room and so on (Gorzela 1996; Sokol 2001). Even within countries, east–west, urban–rural, core–periphery divides complicate any attempt to talk of a singular post-socialist condition. Thomas Carothers is not alone when he concludes “that the vast variations in the post-communist countries call into question the notion of ‘post-communism’” (Carothers 1999, cited in Carey and Raciborski 2004:191; see also, *inter alia*, King 2000).

This diversity, however, is rarely randomly patterned and rarely celebrated. Instead it tends to map onto a narrative of progress which sees diverging states not simply as different but frequently also as backward (Hörschelmann 1997), and it is here that the “diversity” perspective allies itself to more teleological approaches. Beyond the region, diverging patterns of development are often explained through the retreat in some

states, regions or communities to the pre-modern (Sakwa 1999a). Within the region, we can increasingly identify a growing tendency on the part of some key actors to adopt a strategy, most often in international arenas, of othering their more eastern neighbours in the process of integration in western institutions (Kuus 2004).

Keeping Hold of Post-socialist Difference

In contrast to accounts which see the disappearance of post-socialist difference, a growing body of work seeks to keep hold of it, to attempt to theorise the post-socialist as, if not unique, then certainly distinctive. Before developing these arguments here it is necessary to make one clear qualification—few of the authors who draw attention to (post-)socialism’s distinctions do so to the exclusion of other interpretations. They do nevertheless place a central emphasis on the multiple ways in which the experiences of post-socialism continue to be distinctively shaped by the common experiences of socialism. In such an analysis, notwithstanding the diversity of experience between states, the conformity of ideology and policy under socialism is seen as relatively greater than that present in states we characterise as “capitalist” (Humphrey in Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002) and thus demands that we continue to make connections and draw comparisons within and between the disparate states.

In some ways this is a simple argument which insists on the importance of history and geography. The practices and policies of post-socialism are “distinctively inflected by the socialist past and narratives of the past” (Hemment 2003), often in subtle and barely visible ways (Gal and Kligman 2000). Not only does the historical development of institutions, for example, under socialism shape the process of institutionalisation today (see, *inter alia*, Stark and Bruszt 1998), but in more discursive senses, the socialist past is often invoked as prime reference point in multiple spheres (Humphrey in Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002). In some cases, this reference to the past takes the form of a nostalgia for socialism, shaping, amongst other things, electoral results, patterns of consumption and identities (see Bach 2002; Boym 2001; Modrzejewski and Sznajderman 2002). Whilst 1989/1991 saw the formal end of socialism in the region, it did not mark some clean break or rupture with that socialist (and pre-socialist) past. As Hann, Humphrey and Verdery suggest, “the everyday moral communities of socialism have been undermined but not replaced” (2002:10). In addition to this more general argument, there is also a specific argument about the importance of a particular shared history and geography; thus Gille (2004:1), for example, insists on the continuing use of eastern Europe (as against east central Europe) “to emphasize the importance of their *shared* postwar history” (emphasis added).

Grappling with History, Geography and Difference: A Turn to the Post-Colonial

Throughout the reviews and analyses above, the place and use of history, geography and difference have recurred in many different ways. For us, these themes are all central to working through the conceptualisation of post-socialism, but the inherent contradictions, potential pitfalls and complexities raise a number of questions. Perhaps most importantly, in ascribing a commonality deriving from its socialist past to the post-socialist world, we encounter the twin dangers of essentialism (and othering) and determinism. How can we incorporate and even centre the importance of history without reducing the past to a simplified, homogenous caricature, echoing the earlier invention of eastern Europe and its Cold War descendants? In many accounts which insist on the particularity of the post-socialist, Hann, Humphrey and Verdery (2002:8) identify a problematic recourse to “culture” in such phrases as “Balkan mentality”, “Gypsy nature”, “fatalistic orthodox soul” (see also Buchowski 2006). Thus, the region’s difference is interpreted not as a complex interplay of different historical and geographical processes but reduced to a mysterious, residual variable—culture.

A further question derived from an insistence on the centrality of the legacies of socialism, of socialism as the prime referent, is how we deal with the legacies of what came before socialism and what has come after. That each of the countries of the region had very different profiles prior to the imposition of Soviet or Soviet-type rule, with different forms of economy, politics and society, from the clan societies of central Asia to the imperial cores of Budapest and Moscow and the feudal ruralities of central Europe, implies a certain diversity in recent historical and contemporary practices and positions. It is clear that these pre-socialist histories are articulated, in complex and rarely deterministic ways, with particular legacies of socialism—the historians Bideleux and Jeffries (1998:ix) note that, in writing their history of the region, they became “more and more aware of the bearing of the imperial past and the inter-war years on the complex problems of the post-communist present”. At the other end of the temporal scale, research in the region is already beginning to indicate that the distinctiveness of post-socialism rests not just on the influential legacies of socialism, but also on the particular choices and experiences of the “transition” period itself, the paths of extrication (Stark and Bruszt 1998). The fall of communism was associated with some heady promises of freedom and democracy and these too have shaped the experiences of post-socialism. As Creed (2002) has argued “[i]t was the expectations of capitalist consumption in relation to the socialist context of their imagining that made the transition so devastating and shocking” (see also, Stenning 2005b). Thus, we have to ask whether a post-socialism built on the common legacies of socialism

can incorporate these. Can there be a meaningful post-socialism which is not limited to the legacies of socialism?

Thinking Post-Colonially About Post-Socialism

In the remainder of this paper, we focus on the ways in which key theorisations from post-colonialism might be useful in the analysis of history, geography and difference in post-socialism. We are not suggesting that we can make a direct and easy translation from post-colonialism—that post-socialism can and/or should be read as a variety of post-colonialism—but that some of the concepts and understandings of post-colonialism may be productive in studies of post-socialism. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that over the last few years, more and more writers have engaged with post-colonial literatures in their post-socialist analyses, and a few geographers of post-colonialism have connected their work to the experiences of post-socialism. In most cases, these analyses have focused on two particular uses of post-colonialism.

First, for many parts of the region, the post-1989/91 experiences must be, at least in part, interpreted as post-colonial since in these places the “transition” has been about not only the building of markets and democracies, but also a process of decolonisation after the end of the Soviet (and also earlier Russian) empire (see, amongst others, Carey and Raciborski 2004; Cavanagh 2004; Kandiyoti 2002; Sidaway 2000; Smith 1999; Thompson 2000; Zarycki 2005). For these authors, a post-colonial framework is essential for understanding the extrication from Soviet imperial structures, for analysing the post-colonial hangover, and for exploring the implications of both. At the same time, Verdery (in Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002) suggests we might use these frameworks to consider in more detail the roles of power, knowledge and representation in the practice (and legacies) of Soviet domination and in this way question the variety of types of colonialism. A second view focuses on the processes of neo-colonialism and westernisation post-1989, practised in the region through foreign aid, trade and investment and foreign policy, as the former Soviet satellites have traded a Soviet empire for Western hegemony (Janos 2001). Kuus extends this analysis by suggesting that we employ the tools of post-colonialism to explore the operation of power through language, culture, institutions, “exposing and deconstructing knowledges and practices, associated with colonialism, in which objectification and essentialization have been central” (Kuus 2004:483). Reiterating the region’s position between east and west, Cavanagh (2004) notes how east central Europe has long been on the receiving end of the imperialising and colonising tendencies of both; in the contemporary period, having extracted themselves from the Soviet empire, these states find themselves part of neo-colonial discourses of globalization and Europeanization.

In this paper, we wish to shift the focus away from these direct uses of post-colonial theory towards a broader consideration of the conceptualisations employed, which might enable us to grapple with some of the questions of history, geography and difference. Since theorisations of the post-colonial are vast and varied, we do not seek to review and critique these as a whole but to employ them in a set of nine points, intertwining post-socialist analyses with post-colonial ideas in the hope that this allows us to answer some of the questions we left open above.

1 Translating the past to the present: posting socialism. Sakwa (1999a:4) notes that, in common with other “posts”, “[c]oming to terms with the past . . . is one of the central features of postcommunism”. In post-colonial literatures, the movement or translation from the colonial past to the post is seen variously as a step forward, a rejection or repudiation, a transcendence, a return, a subversion, a development. It is seen as both a chronological and epistemological periodisation (Hall 1996). There is no simple or singular interpretation. “[T]he idea of writing ‘post’” (Gregory 2001:612) incorporates conceptualisations not only of “after” but also “‘against the grain of’ and ‘in the knowledge of’ colonialism” (ibid). In this way, it allows for interpretations of history which are critical, even revisionist, but which nevertheless “draw attention to the shadows it still casts over the present” (ibid:613). In a clear echo, Sakwa (1999b:709) writes: “we are indeed working in the shadow of the communist experiment [sic]”. These shadows are often multiple, sometimes unpredictable; they are not linear—post-socialism does not simply come after socialism, but also against it, reflected through it. Thinking post-colonially problematizes the analysis of history; history is both decentred through a process of deconstruction, which opens space for multiple histories with uncertain determinisms but also centred through the process of posting. Thus thinking post-colonially about post-socialism challenges us to theorise more thoroughly the connections between the post-socialist present and the past. This theorisation of unpredictable translations from the past raises a series of further questions—about the mediation of the translation by other histories and other geographies, about the rethinking of histories and categorical frameworks, about the methodologies we can employ to theorise more meticulously—and we now come to these questions in turn.

2 The presence of the pre- and post-socialist. Working against a notion of linear translation, the post-socialist must come to terms with and incorporate both the more distant and more recent pasts—the pre-socialist and the transitional. In different spheres, places and times, the socialist past may be displaced so that other histories are equally, if not more, important. The post-colonial condition is theorised as “an

aftermath” which evokes and articulates earlier histories, “the pre- comes to us through the colonial and the post-” (Loomba 1998:7) such that “the colonial epoch is not by any means *the* defining feature” of post-colonial societies (Sidaway 2000:596). From this perspective, we can explore the intertwining of pre-socialism, socialism and post-socialism—a process clearly exemplified by Creed (2002) who argues that false hopes of the market, inherited from memories of pre-socialism, nurtured in its absence under socialism and cultivated still further in the particular moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s, combined to structure the very real disappointments of post-socialism.

3 Multiple post-socialisms. Focusing on the complex and unpredictable translation from multiple pasts leads us to consider the multiplicity of post-socialisms and to explore the ways in which the diversity which so many commentators have identified—in more or less problematic ways—can be seen not as a counter to any theorised post-socialism but instead as an enrichment, and a challenge. In as much as post-colonial constructions of history are multiple, so too “(post-) colonial spaces are complex, fractured and foliated, and can rarely be reduced to any simple binary geometry” (Gregory 2001:614). Post-colonialism “signals proliferations” and need not imply “that all societies are ‘post-colonial’ *in the same way*” (Hall 1996:248). The presence of “multiple postcolonial conditions” (Sidaway 2000:595), in time and space, reflects the heterogeneity of discourses and practices of colonialism and post-colonialism and allows us, following this reading, to acknowledge and theorise the uneven development of socialism and post-socialism. Whilst a conception of post-socialism rests on at least some shared history, it need not imply uniformity, but rather commonalities which enable us to interrogate how and why markets, elections, consumption, families and so on work differently in different places, despite their shared past.

4 Rethinking the socialist past. A post-colonial reading of the post-socialist insists on the importance of the socialist past but also on the necessity to rethink that past. Post-colonial approaches (and particularly critiques of orientalism) focus attention on the colonial frameworks within which so much research in and of the colonies was produced. The predominant framework of totalitarianism, which served the geopolitical concerns of the Cold War, ignored and obscured not only spaces for dissent, transgression and resistance, but also more mundane spaces of everyday life. Thus, post-socialism is also seen as offering an opportunity to reconsider theorisations of “socialism” (Grant and Ries 2002; Verdery 1996), not only by returning to the archives to interrogate some of the assumptions of the previous era (Kotkin 1997; Horváth 2005; Pittaway 2005), but also through a growing research agenda which seeks out the “alternative spaces carved between the lines and on the margin of official

discourses” (Boym 1994:5) in which resistance to or ignorance of the overriding dogmas of socialism were practised or experienced.

5 Methodologies for the post. Alongside the rethinking of socialist histories, a post-colonial (and more broadly post-structural or post-modern) framework also encourages us to think carefully about our methodologies (Hörschelmann and Stenning forthcoming). The practices and methodologies for researching the socialist world, in the context of Sovietology, were often restricted not only by the practicalities of access and language but also by the demands of government and the wider ideological environment. As Pickles and Smith (2007) suggest, politics and method were deeply connected. In thinking again about the relationship between politics and method, post-colonial approaches oblige us to “give voice to the ‘natives’ as analysts of their own condition” (Verdery in Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002), not only through deeper consideration of regional thinkers and analysts but also through shifting methodologies which encourage us to, for example, write ethnographies of the region and to explore the practices and consequences of representation through discursive work. These research practices are connected more widely to anti-essentialist methodologies (within, for example, feminist and post-structural frameworks) which seek to interrogate and theorise the meanings of multiple articulations, and from here to make particular political interventions.

6 Rethinking relationships with the west. The geopolitics of the Cold War fundamentally shaped “the cognitive organisation of the world” (Verdery 1996:4; see also Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002), dividing not only east from west but also isolating interpretations of key categories on each side of the east–west divide. Post-colonial theory inspires us “to re-read the very binary form in which the colonial encounter has for so long been represented” (Hall 1996:247), not only questioning older histories, but also the very framework within which knowledge was produced. In this way, post-socialism must also incorporate the posting of the Cold War (Verdery in Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002) and demands a renegotiation of materialities, discourses and concepts, in both east and west and a reconsideration of the categories east and west themselves (see also Kuehnast 2000; Hörschelmann 2001, 2002). There is a danger, however—one which has also been noted in the post-colonial context (Bahl and Dirlik 2000; McClintock 1992)—that by interrogating the east–west relationship and placing it at the centre of our analyses, we reinforce the west as the prime referent and detract attention from the east in and of itself.

7 Locating post-socialism relationally. It should be clear that we are not proposing an isolated, essentialized post-socialism, but one that is always already articulated with other times (see points 1 and 2)

and other places. Indeed, it is these articulations, coming together as they do, that form the particularities of post-socialism. As Stuart Hall suggests (1996:245, citing Mani and Frankenburg) “the ‘post-colonial’ does not operate on its own but ‘is in effect a construct internally differentiated by its intersections with other unfolding relations’”. Post-socialism is built out of the legacies of socialism and pre-socialism, articulated with contemporary processes of globalisation and neoliberalisation, in their particular incarnation as “transition” but also in their other more universal manifestations, with the passage of European Union enlargement and with wider experiences of restructuring and development, with which it shares both discursive and material features (Stenning and Bradshaw 1999). In theorising post-socialism, Hann, amongst others, insists that “we must not privilege the common distinctive features of the socialist countries to the extent we lose sight of the many features shared all along with other parts of the world, including the most developed industrial societies of the West” (Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002:9). Gal and Kligman insist on the “parallels, interactions and contrasts with other regions in policies, social trends as well as discourses” (2000:4), giving the example of the process of privatisation, which, they argue, was not simply contemporaneous in different parts of the world but also “justified by parallel arguments and ideologies, pursued by interrelated, overlapping groups of elites, personally and corporately linked to each other” (ibid:11).

The challenge of connecting post-socialism to other theorisations of contemporary social change is taken up in different ways by a number of postmodern writers who see the collapse of communism as part of the defeat of total order and the collapse of metanarratives (Bauman 1992; Meštrović 1994). For both Bauman and Meštrović, despite the very real differences in their analyses (Outhwaite and Ray 2005),⁸ this connection between post-socialism and post-modernity echoes through the growing attention to notions of hybridity, representation and discourse, the spectacle, power and knowledge, disorder and chaos in post-socialist research. Amongst other concerns Outhwaite and Ray note in relation to employing a post-modern framework in the post-socialist world, they echo the point we make above: “to equate postcommunism with postmodernism or to subsume the former in the latter is to perpetuate the practice whereby Western preoccupations and views of the social world get extended to everywhere else” (Outhwaite and Ray 2005:103), an approach which “overlooks the specificity of the Soviet system” (ibid:104).

8 We're all post-socialist now: post-socialism in the west. One of the defining features of post-colonial geographies has been the attention they have drawn to the post-colonial presence in the west, reflecting

the post-colonial as a global “process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome” (Hulme, cited in Hall 1996:246), a syndrome which “was never simply external to the societies of the imperial metropolis [but] inscribed deeply within them” (ibid). In similar ways, the projects of communism and the Cold War shaped the west as much as they shaped the east, framing patterns of economic development, political settlements, popular culture and much more. The process of disengagement—transition—involves the west all the more. Thus the focus of post-socialist geographies needs to challenge all geographers, not only of post-socialism, to take up the epistemological challenge of the post-socialist world. We can legitimately ask who and where the post-socialist subject is, to explore the post-socialist in the west—in the “new” Europe, in transnational economies, in migration flows, in the remaking of diasporic communities, in political alternatives, coupling the area studies of old with translocal, decentred and diasporic studies (Chakrabarty 1998; Gibson-Graham 2004).

9 Persistent post-socialism. Alongside the conceptualisation of post-socialism’s geographies, we must also consider its temporalities—and the question of post-socialism’s persistence is perhaps one of the most critical of all. Is post-socialism simply a transitory category? Are we already witnessing, as some have argued, the end of post-socialism? Holmes (2001) identifies 1989–2001 as the post-communist decade (see also Kennedy 2002). Sakwa (1999a) suggests that post-communism ends when the experiences of communism are no longer explanatory, when other social formations predominate. It is for this reason, perhaps, that so many have claimed the moment of EU accession as heralding the end of post-socialism. Within the region, new generations of entrepreneurs, politicians, ambassadors and trend-setters appear increasingly unwilling to accept the term post-socialism, seeing it as constrictive and backwards looking. At the other end of the generational scale, those who built socialism and who grew up with it are dying. There is a generational shift away from those whose lives were shaped by socialism and remember it clearly. Yet each of these approaches belies a post-socialism too closely allied to transition and tainted by the teleologism of that concept “stamped with a similar implacable logic” (Sakwa 1999a:114). A post-socialism which is ending, or must end, is a post-socialism of closures, fixated on the end of difference.

This kind of interpretation stands in stark contrast to the theorisation of post-colonialism as a condition which persists long beyond the end of empire, and indeed is seen to have so much intellectual strength precisely because of the persistence of colonial forms, practices and legacies. Despite an ongoing critique, very few post-colonial theorists accept the “end of post-colonialism”, seeing instead the persistence of the “colonial present” (Gregory 2004) and the continuing importance—politically

and theoretically—of working to theorise both colonialism and post-colonialism. Constructing the post-colonial—and the post-socialist—as articulated with other times and spaces creates a “post” which moves beyond an either/or presence/absence. That is, if we understand post-socialism as a set of conditions which exists in the articulation of, for example, EU enlargement and the legacies of socialism, then the accession of some countries to the EU presents no particular challenge to post-socialism. It may transform it, of course, but it need not herald its demise. This kind of post-socialism is not supplanted, but supplemented, by the growing influence of global and European flows; these new flows and new influences add to the already complex processes of overdetermination.

Conclusions: The Conditions of Post-socialism

Thinking post-colonially allows us to interpret post-socialisms and the legacies of socialism in ways that avoid determinism and that incorporate not only that which is posted but also earlier, uneven histories and geographies. It moves us away from any notion of a linear transition, a notion which demands that post-socialism must be singular to be theoretically convincing, and it challenges the historicism and essentialism of the more culturalist accounts of post-socialist difference. With these kinds of multiple histories and uneven legacies, space is created for alterity, the always present other, which would allow us to construct accounts of post-socialism as partial and hybrid, as not always explanatory. This kind of post-socialism extends beyond the post-socialist states of east central Europe and the former Soviet Union, encourages a rethinking of geographical categories (most particularly of east and west) and of existing histories, and shapes and is shaped by a particular set of methodologies, validating the subaltern, the discursive and the ethnographic.

In the introduction, we argued that there is a persistent need to understand the remaking of post-socialist lives, to challenge the tendency to collapse post-socialist difference in universal(ising) accounts of change and to employ post-socialist difference to rethink our categories and concepts in a post-socialist world. There are countless post-socialisms, and whilst some pluralities have the potential to be disabling, limiting as we have suggested any effort to coherently conceptualise *the* post-socialist condition, they are also hugely enabling, creating spaces for theorisations which are open, full of potential and marked more by beginnings than the endings so commonly associated with post-socialism. There is, of course, a danger that, in conceptualising a post-socialism that is so partial, plural and open, we have all but theorised it out of existence. That is a danger we are happy to encounter, and to leave as a challenge for others to contest.

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Endnotes

¹ This intentionally echoes both the commonly used "actually existing socialism" and "actually existing/occurring transition" (Pickles and Smith 1998).

² There are connections here, of course, to another set of literatures which seeks to deconstruct the omnipotence of global capitalism by celebrating and envisioning capitalism's others (see, for example, Castree 1999; Gibson-Graham 1996), focusing, however, more on other practices than other spaces.

³ We do acknowledge that Anglo-American geographies are articulated with other knowledges and are internally differentiated (Johnston and Sidaway 2004).

⁴ Domański notes the "almost complete ignorance of the non-capitalist part of the continent in numerous Anglo-Saxon textbooks and articles dedicated to global economic and political space in the 1980s" (Domański 2001:27).

⁵ In fact, all but Hann and his co-authors call it post-communism (or postcommunism). In this paper, we predominantly use post-socialism, but follow the lead of other authors in citing their work.

⁶ Others, such as Cliff (1974) and Bauman (1992), writing from very different perspectives, also began to emphasise the connections between east and west.

⁷ Or, as Chakrabarty (2000:8) suggests, not so much en route as in "the waiting room of history".

⁸ Outhwaite and Ray note that Bauman's is a more affirmative post-modern post-socialism, focused on "new energies and subversive forces" (2005:102) which stands in contrast to Meštrović's exploration of amoral and violent postmodernisms.

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