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## ETHNOGRAPHIES OF POST-SOCIALIST CHANGE

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## ETHNOGRAPHIES OF POST-SOCIALIST CHANGE

### **Abstract**

Questions of methodology are central to the construction of emancipatory knowledges and to the effort of decentring western perspectives. In this paper, we explore the methodological consequences of our argument for recognising post-socialist difference strategically without collapsing it into homogenous categories (authors, *forthcoming*). We make the case for a more sustained effort to apply ethnographic methods and to develop what Haraway calls an “ethnographic attitude” in geographical work on post-socialist change. We show how ethnography enhances our understanding of post-socialist change before considering the contribution that ethnographies of post-socialism make to broader theorisations and conceptualisations in geography and the social sciences. Ethnography is advocated here as a way to constantly re-examine the value of established theories and concepts against the background of different scenarios as well as a search for new, context-related theories. Post-socialist change presents a number of challenges to ethnographic research, which are discussed in the paper. We focus particularly on questions of theory applicability, representation, empirical- methodological approach, and ethics.

### **Introduction**

In our paper “Posting Socialism” we draw on the work of postcolonial critics in order to develop approaches for researching post-socialist transformation that recognise difference as an important strategic device for provincialising western knowledge and for challenging ‘transitology’. We also argue for vigilance against essentialising difference, however, in order not to erase the plurality of experience. Further, we see the identification of connections across east/west binary divides as equally important for critical geography projects that seek to move beyond the traditional confines of marginalised ‘area studies’ (Smith, 2002). These theoretical contentions have major methodological implications, which we seek to address in this paper. Far from regarding the *how* of geographical research as a secondary concern, we agree with feminist researchers (Harding, 1987; Oakley, 1981; Mies, 1994; Nast *et al.*, 1994) that questions

of methodology are central to the project of constructing emancipatory knowledges. Our argument in this paper is for a more sustained and committed effort to deploy ethnographic approaches, both in geography generally and in research on post-socialist transformations particularly. It is our conviction that ethnographic research is best able to address, work through and theorise the contradictory experiences of post-socialist change.

Despite a substantial increase in the use and appreciation of qualitative methods generally in human geography over the last two decades (Limb and Dwyer, 2001; Rose, 2001; Shurmer-Smith, 2002), we find that the radical potential of ethnography, not just as a set of methods (e.g. participant observation) but as a substantially different approach to research remains underexplored (Herbert, 2000). In research on post-socialist societies, this reluctance to engage with the work and methods of ethnographers has been even more pronounced. Although geographers have been amongst the most ardent critiques of ‘transitology’ (Pickles and Smith, 1998; Pickles and Unwin, 2004; Bradshaw and Stenning, 2004; van Hoven, 2004; Hörschelmann 2002), few have engaged in a sustained way with existing ethnographic research or have adopted it as a methodological approach to study the economic, political, social and cultural changes associated with post-socialist transformation (but see Pickles 2001; Dunn, 2004; Boren, 2005; Hörschelmann and Schäfer, 2005; Smith and Stenning, *forthcoming*; Stenning 2005). This is particularly surprising given the quantity of work in ethnography and anthropology on post-socialist change in recent years (Hann, 2002; Berdahl *et al.*, 2000; Bridger and Pine, 1998; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999).

In this paper, we argue that the reluctance to embrace ethnographic ways of theorising and researching comes at a price. We seek to demonstrate the value of ethnography for geographical research on post-socialist societies and argue, with Herbert, that “the benefits merit the challenge. A geography that seeks better understandings of how social structures and human agents are stirred and separated in everyday spatial contexts must embrace more, and more rigorous, ethnography” (Herbert, 2000: 564). Drawing on the work of key ethnographers in the field of socialist and post-socialist studies, we pose and

respond to the following questions, which arise from our own engagement with ethnographic work over the past few years:

- 1) How does ethnography enhance our understanding of post-socialist change?
- 2) What difference do ethnographies of post-socialism make for broader theorisations and conceptualisations in geography and the social sciences?
- 3) What does post-socialism mean for ethnography? Which challenges does it present to the discipline?

These questions are addressed in the context of recent critiques of ethnographic practice as formulated particularly by feminist and postmodern writers. We feel that research on post-socialist transformations brings the relevance of these critiques to the fore, but also shows why and how ethnography is able to address them. It is our aim to show that ethnography is most valuable for understanding post-socialist change when it is placed within a multi-sited context and critically intervenes in broader theoretical debates (Marcus, 1986, 1998). Counter to those who see ethnographic accounts as either illustrations of how 'the global system' works in specific places or as a collection of stories about disconnected cultures, we argue for ethnographies of post-socialist change as a potent means to question the supremacy of macrological accounts without retreating into the mosaic realm of discrete cultural differences. Geographers can make significant contributions to this by problematising understandings of space, place, area and scale. In our conclusion, we sketch some of the ways in which geographical thinking can be brought to bear more beneficially on ethnographic analyses of post-socialism<sup>1</sup> and show how ethnographic approaches can be incorporated into geographical research.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we are primarily concerned with research on societies that have experienced and exited state-socialist systems, but there are good reasons to question this restricted definition in as far as the revolutionary changes of the late 80s/early 90s have inaugurated a post-socialist period with effects on politics on a global scale (authors, *forthcoming*).

### **How does ethnography enhance our understanding of post-socialist change?**

There is a significant degree of variation in descriptions of ethnography. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) adopt a fairly non-restrictive approach, defining it as “primarily a particular method or set of methods” that “[i]n its most characteristic form ... involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data is available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (1). Geographers have most frequently chosen a variation of this definition in their discussions of ethnography (Herbert, 2000). However, what marks the particular characteristic of ethnography for many of its contemporary practitioners involves more than the application of a certain set of methods. It is about a sustained, critical effort to negotiate the contradictions between seeking an understanding of people’s situated, context-specific social interactions and interpretative schemas of their ‘worlds’ (van Maanen, 1995) *and* the epistemological risk of bringing one’s own, theoretically informed and not-so-innocent interpretations to these observations (Wolff, 1996). Haraway has described this as an “ethnographic attitude” which can be brought to a range of subjects rather than as a set of methods:

“To study technoscience [and human science] requires an immersion in worldly material-semiotic practices, where the analysts, as well as the humans and nonhumans studied, are all at risk – morally, politically, technically, and epistemologically. ‘Ethnography,’ in this extended sense, is not so much a specific procedure in anthropology as it is a method of being at risk in the face of practices and discourses into which one inquires. To be at risk is not the same thing as identifying with the subjects of study; quite the contrary. And self-identity is as much at risk as the temptation to identification. One is at risk in the face of serious nonidentity that challenges previous stabilities, convictions, or ways of being of many kinds. An ‘ethnographic attitude’ can be adopted within any kind of inquiry, including textual analysis. Not limited to a specific discipline, an ethnographic attitude is a mode of practical and theoretical attention, a way of remaining mindful and accountable. Such a method is not about ‘taking sides’ in a predetermined way.

But it is about risks, purposes, and hopes – one’s own and others’ – embedded in knowledge projects.” (Haraway, 1997: 190f; cited in Schneider, 2002: 471f)

The situated accounts of ethnographers, especially in a world of ‘flows’, relations and interconnections, enable purposively *partial* perspectives from *within* the dense networks described by geographers like Amin (2002), Thrift (1996), Massey (1999) and others that enable a radical politics of difference which not only *recognises* ‘other actors, spheres, scales and places’ (Nagar *et al.*, 2002) but shows how their actions and interpretations square with (equally situated) macrological accounts. We agree with Herbert (2000), who views ethnography as “a uniquely useful method for uncovering the *processes* and *meanings* that undergird sociospatial life” (550). He argues that ethnography is able not only to unearth taken-for-granted concepts and to thereby “reveal the knowledge and meaning structures that provide the blueprint for social action” (551), but also to examine “what people *do* as well as what they *say*” (552). Importantly, Herbert’s emphasis on processes and meanings leads him to recognise ethnography’s potential to reveal challenges to macrological structures as well as the details of their reproduction. Ethnography’s task is thus not primarily the empirical description of everyday life, but making connections between micrological observations and broader interpretations and theorisations.

Post-socialist ethnographers view the benefits of their work in very similar ways. Anthologies published recently by anthropologists and ethnographers (Hann, 2002a; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Bridger and Pine, 1998; Berdahl, Lampland and Bunzl, 2000) underline particularly the necessity of examining grand theories of transition against the reality of localised social practices and meaning constructions. Starting from the recognition that shock therapy approaches and neo-liberal economics have delivered an impoverished understanding of post-socialist transformation and have, due to their universalism and one-dimensionality, resulted in socially and culturally insensitive policies of limited success (Hann, 2002b), anthropologists and ethnographers have called for greater awareness of the divergent ways in which transition is lived, experienced and interpreted by locally embedded social actors. They concur with path dependency theory (Stark and Bruszt, 1998) in regarding ‘transition’ as neither a complete break with the

past nor a predictable historical process, but place more emphasis on the way the past is selectively applied in contemporary social practices and on its cultural construction (Humphrey, 2002a and 2002b; Creed, 1998; authors, *forthcoming*). Ethnographers have also traditionally shown a stronger interest in marginalised groups and practices, which arguably leads them to develop a more complex understanding of social agency (Humphrey and Mandel, 2002). The value of ethnography for conceptualising post-socialist change has been summed up well by one of its most renowned practitioners during and after the Cold War, Caroline Humphrey, who observes that in a situation of uncertainty, “when each action is both the unmaking of a previous way of life and a step toward a new, unknown one” (2002a: xx), anthropologists<sup>2</sup> are most able to capture the specifics and generalities of socio-cultural transformation:

“Anthropology’s strength is its rootedness in the everyday, in its familiarity with the practices that ethnographers are able to observe and question ..., anthropologists have tended to conceive their objects in terms of meaning, that is requiring interpretation. Since the reflexive turn of the 1980s, they have understood that such ‘objects’ are both discovered and created, in other words that they are in some aspect an artifact of the anthropological process itself.” (ibid: xviii)

While highlighting the need for reflexivity, Humphrey here also draws our attention to the meanings constructed by locally embedded social actors. This is a further issue frequently raised by ethnographers researching the post-socialist situation. They encounter a complex interpretive terrain, where western concepts such as ‘the market’, ‘employment’, ‘class’ or ‘civil society’ take on distinctly different meanings from those applied by policy makers and non-governmental agencies. Ethnographic research can have significant political impacts in as far as it promotes “a better understanding of the different meanings of key terms in the eastern European context” (Hann, 1998: xiv; also see Hann and Dunn, 1996). We come back to this point later, but would emphasise here the relevance of ethnographic work for understanding how conceptual differences affect

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<sup>2</sup> The terms ‘ethnography’ and ‘anthropology’ are used interchangeably in the literature, since the traditional distinctions between ethnography as the study of other, ‘ethnic’ cultures and anthropology as concerned more broadly with human cultures and societies is no longer tenable.

the implementation, acceptance and negotiation of policies in specific post-socialist contexts.

Work by post-socialist ethnographers is distinguished most from other types of research by the attention paid to local practices and interpretations of living through and surviving transition. Most ethnographers eschew broad generalisations and instead examine how local actors reconfigure their lives in the context of broader economic and political developments and how they explain the changes they encounter (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999):

“With their focus on the fine-grained details of everyday life, anthropological studies not only have contributed a unique awareness of and perspective on the experience of ‘transition’ but have examined its multiple dimensions and trajectories. In so doing, anthropologists have challenged a certain linear, teleological thinking surrounding the collapse of socialism and pointed to the contradictions, paradoxes, and different trajectories of post-socialist societies.”  
(Berdahl, 1997: 9)

What may appear as surprising departures from the path of transition to a capitalist market economy in research oriented towards the macro-level, becomes comprehensible in ethnographic texts as the result of interpretive connections that people make between past and contemporary experiences and as strategies to survive the transformations of the present both literally and in terms of personal and social identities. References to past ideologies and practices are shown to be part of the negotiation of contemporary realities that can be seen as a ‘rational’ response indeed from the perspective of the local actor rather than as an unreflective nostalgia for outmoded models of thought (West, 2002; Pine and Bridger, 1998; Lampland, 2002). Ethnographers emphasise that these references to the past entail a significant amount of reinterpretation, but that they also represent a symbolic resource both for making sense of the present and for challenging the new ‘status quo’. A highly illuminating example of this is offered by Gerald Creed (1998) in his study of socialism and transition in rural Bulgaria. He shows that many misconceptions about post-socialist societies today are rooted in a limited understanding of the way in which socialism was “domesticated”, made liveable, in the past. To Creed,



the treatment of rural Bulgarians' continued reference to socialism as a 'communist legacy' not only misses the way in which villagers had adjusted socialism to their needs, but also that the embrace of domesticated socialism is a defence against would-be capitalist excesses, an attempt to use socialism to domesticate capitalism (277). He concludes that "nuances are missed by those who never recognized the domestication of socialism and who retain mutually exclusive views of communism and capitalism. A real transition hinges on overcoming this opposition through ethnographic appreciations and expositions of local interests in their historical contexts" (278).

Like Creed, many ethnographers are critical of images of a sudden transition or even 'revolution' and use their inside knowledge of (post-)socialist societies to sketch longer processes of change as well as to highlight the fate of the many who were located off-centre in the events that sealed the demise of socialist governments (Pine and Bridger, 1998; Giordano and Kostova, 2002). Transition for them is not a self-chosen path, but an imposed new reality which, even if it is welcome, needs to be interpreted and negotiated in concrete local contexts that are often quite far removed from those of the activists of 1989:

"More than a world moving forwards, or even a world turned upside down, we seem to have before us a world moving sideways and backwards, simultaneously and often skewed. The ways that people talk about the past and the present, and their ambivalence about both 'modernity' and 'tradition', reflect this confusion."  
(Pine, 2002: 98)

How people find their way in this confusing situation and which interpretative schemes they apply when, how and why is best captured by ethnographic research, since it seeks actively to avoid presumptions and to theorise on the basis of close-up observation. It is because of this openness towards empirical specifics that ethnographers, rather than presenting us with a singular perspective, develop a number of theoretical perspectives and cover a broad range of topics, a brief list of which includes: the construction of national and ethnic identities (Anderson, 2000; Barsegian, 2000; Brown, 2000; Wanner 1998; Zircovic, 2000), border constructions (Berdahl, 1997), changes in gender relations (Pine, 1998, 2002; Heyat, 2002; DeSoto, 2000; Kuehnast, 2000), the transformation of

family and friendship relations (West, 2002), markets and informal economic systems (Humphrey, 2002a; Kaneff, 2002; Mandel and Humphrey, 2002), processes of and resistance to decollectivisation (Creed, 1998; Lampland, 2002), religion and ritual (Vitebsky, 2002), relations of trust/mistrust (Giordano and Kostova, 2002; West, 2002), new social actors and networks (Humphrey, 2002a; Sampson, 2002), class identities (Kideckel, 2002), meanings and practices of consumption (Latham, 2002), or reconfigurations of time and space (Verdery, 1996, 2001). While these are issues generally not sufficiently addressed in macro-level research, what makes ethnography's contribution so valuable and distinctive is its focus on contextualised cultural interpretation and local practices: "This is the strength of ethnography. It can show how everyday practices and social relationships are embedded in the peculiarities of local paths of social change, and in trajectories of possible becomings" (Kalb, 2002: 323). Ethnography creates a fuller and more differentiated picture of post-socialist transformation from a spatially and historically distinct position. Rather than seeking to eradicate the difference that place makes, it strategically employs positionality to provide a grounded perspective that explains how large-scale processes are interpreted, responded to and (re)produced by social actors in specific locations.

### **What difference do ethnographies of post-socialism make for broader theorisations and conceptualisations in geography and the social sciences?**

Ethnography's tendency towards observation at the scale of everyday, 'local' interactions at the expense of broader theoretical connections and comparisons has been one of the key areas of critique in recent years, however. George Marcus (1986, 1988) thus noted that interpretive ethnographies frequently fail to show how closely observed cultural worlds are embedded in larger systems and what role these worlds have in historical events:

"Change and the larger frameworks of local politics have usually been treated in separate theoretical or conceptual discourse with some ethnographic detail added for illustration. The descriptive space of ethnographies itself has not seemed an appropriate context for working through conceptual problems of this larger order.

The world of larger systems and events has thus often been seen as externally impinging on and bounding little worlds, but not as integral to them.” (ibid.: 166)

Bringing ethnographic observations and broader theorisations into conversation for us, however, not only demands recognition of the embeddedness of ‘localities’ in global processes, but also the recognition that ungrounded macrological accounts are insufficient for observing, valuing and understanding the lived worlds of ‘transition’ and that they can be challenged by ethnographic research. Post-socialist ethnographers have sought to do exactly that. While viewing the specific contexts in which they conduct their observations as strongly embedded in wider networks of global capitalist expansion (see especially Burawoy and Verdery, 1999), they have shown that conceptualisations of capitalism may need to be revised together with simplistic understandings of socialism/communism as ‘totalitarian’ societies, if phenomena like ‘the market’ are shown to become constituted in quite unexpected ways where capitalist structures are newly emerging (Humphrey and Mandel, 2002).

The specific situation of post-socialist countries also offers historic opportunities for expanding our understanding of social change and how it occurs under conditions of systemic transformation. While we would caution against regarding the post-socialist situation as a convenient laboratory space for social observation and would neither claim that it is the only example of radical systemic change, we agree with Daphne Berdahl (1997), that for anthropologists, and for other social scientists, “post-socialist transitions offer opportunities to explore some of the central issues of the discipline: the relationship among economic systems, political entities, and culture; the construction of identity, ethnicity, and nationalism; social and cultural change” (11).

A further contribution that post-socialist ethnographies can make to broader theorisation in the social sciences is that they return the gaze to ask whether the concepts applied in East Central Europe and the former Soviet Republics today reflect actual conditions in the West or whether they are ideal-types whose value for understanding established market economies equally needs to be questioned (Pine and Bridger, 1998; Verdery, 2002). As Hann (2002b: 10) asks provocatively: “Have Western elites, supported by the

dominant disciplines of transitology, systematically promoted models for the post-socialist countries that bear little connection to the social realities of their own countries?” One way to respond to this provocative question and to bring the insights of post-socialist ethnographies ‘home’ to the centre would be to conduct thoroughly comparative research in east-west contexts and to thus assess critically the validity of western concepts and models in both situations.

In addressing questions about contemporary global conditions, post-socialist ethnographers contribute to the two-way flow of theorisation that Smith identifies as central to analyses of trans-local and trans-national phenomena (2002). They demonstrate the need for a more questioning attitude towards constructions of socialist and post-socialist societies while joining others in their efforts of dismantling imperialist, homogenising understandings of ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’ (also see Stenning, 2005b). In order to achieve this, however, we argue elsewhere (authors, *forthcoming*), studies of post-socialism need to manage the fine balance between recognising difference and exceptionalism, which homogenises post-socialist contexts, accentuates difference from other countries and disconnects in a way that prevents analysis of post-socialist societies as fully embedded in global networks and relations (Kalb, 2002).

### **What does post-socialism mean for ethnography? What challenges does it present to the discipline?**

There have been numerous critiques of the ethnographic approach in recent years. In particular, the tendency to remained fixed in single localities, to reiterate rather than to question boundaries, to conceptualise culture in homogenous and all-encompassing ways, to participate in the construction of ‘otherness’ and in cultural colonialism as well as to adopt particular rhetoric strategies uncritically have come under scrutiny (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Khare, 1998; Wolff, 1996; Hobbs and May, 1993; van Maanen 1995; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Wolff, 1992; Davis, 1999; Clifford, 1988). To this list we may add the tendency to concentrate on rural places, which restricts the insights that ethnographies can deliver for urbanised and urbanising societies. Researchers too quickly assume that the boundaries of rural communities are clearly defined and that village structures allow

easier insights into local networks and social relations. The challenge is to recognise both the reconstitution of communities and relations beyond locality in rural areas and to find ways of conducting ethnographic research sensibly in the potentially more complex urban arena. Finally, there has been an over-emphasis on cultural issues at the expense of economic questions in much ethnographic work, which current research on consumption and household economies is seeking to alter (Smith, 2004; Smith and Stenning, *forthcoming*).

Post-socialist ethnographers, while engaging with these critiques, have had to confront further problems arising from the particular context of their research. They argue that the post-socialist situation poses additional challenges to ethnography as well as underlining the currency of previous critiques. Ries (2000) has divided the critical issues arising from post-socialism for ethnographic research into several interconnected categories of which we focus particularly here on theoretical, representational, empirical-methodological and ethical aspects.

### ***Theoretical Issues***

A major problem for ethnographers, as for other researchers of post-socialist societies, is the question of theory applicability and formation. How far do existing theories travel? How applicable are they to the local situation? Do they help or hinder us to understand the specific scenarios encountered in post-socialist societies? A starting point for answering these questions is the recognition that western researchers bring their own historical baggage to the situations they study. As Katherine Verdery (1996, 2002) makes clear, Cold War ideologies have positioned us strongly in both, the former East and West, leading to taken-for-granted notions about the self and the other and to strong assumptions about the value and universality of concepts such as ‘democracy’, ‘the market’, or ‘civil society’ that need to be questioned rather than unthinkingly applied in the post-socialist context (also see Hann, 1998; Watson, 2000). She suggests pursuing post-Cold War rather than post-socialist studies, since this reflects the renegotiation of identities and concepts that needs to take place on both sides of the former divide (2002). It is a point that relates more generally to ethnographic practice and the politics of

research. Sustained engagement with the lives and perspectives of others as it is central to ethnographic research is rarely a harmonious process. Rather, it works through conflicting world views whose ‘reconciliation’ relies far too often on uneven power relations which tame the difference of the other. Critical ethnographers seek to resist these efforts of taming and to explore the radically unsettling potential of contradictory experiences, to open spaces for their expression. Some of the most insightful work in this respect is produced by those who make visible the points of irreconcilable difference and of fractured positions (this is particularly noticeable in work on spirituality and ritual; cf. Anderson, 2000; Humphrey, 2002a; Kaneff, 2002). In searching for ways of making the tensions and necessarily unresolved contradictions of research *work on* the texts of the analyst, ethnographers are sketching paths that critical geographers can track with much gain in order to challenge their own positions, including the recognition that Cold War interpretative schemas have indeed left a legacy on them. We find this kind of reflexivity still sorely missing in geographical work. It is our conviction that unearthing and challenging the ways on which geographical thinking has been shaped by Cold War narratives should have consequences for research far beyond the post-socialist context (authors, *forthcoming*; Stenning, 2005b).

### ***Representation***

These issues of terminology relate strongly to the debates on representation which have taken place in ethnography since the 1980s. Like many colleagues in their field, post-socialist ethnographers recognise that their work frequently departs from the realist ideal of objective representation and involves a significant amount of rhetoric, as well as constructing relations between other and self (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Clifford, 1988; van Maanen, 1995). As Ries explains: “Ethnographers go to post-socialist societies armed with all kinds of nearly unexaminable perceptions, mythic categories, and competitive stances and encounter there people similarly equipped” (x). Yet, it is not only the historical background which can influence the research encounter, as Kuehnast (2000) indicates in her call for greater reflexivity:

“Conducting fieldwork in the post-socialist era is an ethnographic opportunity for negotiating identities between anthropologist and informant. Whether these

identities are remnants of the Cold War or fragments of the global marketization of popular culture, a reflexive approach is necessary to reexamine our assumptions about the other.” (114)

We have already mentioned the need to challenge the conscious and unconscious assumptions that the Cold War and subsequent developments have anchored in “the cognitive organisation of the world” (Verdery, 1996: 4; quoted in Ries, 2000: x). These concerns also relate to finding ways of communicating with research subjects (Pearson, 1993). Feminist researchers have argued that, beyond seeking to level the playing field towards research participants through the application of empowering methods, bottom-up-approaches etc., strong reflexivity is needed that “requires the researcher to subject herself to the same level of scrutiny as she directs to her respondents” (McCorkell and Myers, 2003: 205). Doing so, however, does not solve the problem of negotiating different opinions between researcher and respondents, as Anderson’s (2000) account makes clear. He struggled to reconcile his own views of the social constructedness of ethnic and national identities with the political interests of his research subjects in seeing their ethnic identity confirmed by a foreign anthropologist. Rather than accepting and complying with the ‘native’ view, Anderson argues that “the anthropologist has a duty to question directly the local value framework” (138). Anderson finds that the ethnographer’s work is politically highly charged in post-Soviet states and emphasises that to romanticise local knowledge is not a viable option:

“How should people live? It is precisely this very subjective and moral question that is at issue in every interaction within the post-socialist states. By giving an honest diagnosis of how a narrowly defined national category might disappear, one accepts the invitation to think, alongside one’s field hosts, about how the future can be lived without the burden of building a nation.” (145)

‘Native’ ethnographers are not absolved from responsibility either. While they may be able to access spheres closed to western observers and hold deeper insight into local cultural constructions, their position in the field can be compromised by the assumption of ‘being one of us’, while in their interpretations and representations, they face problems of commitment to and compliance with the norms accepted ‘back home’. As Barsegian

(2000) explains with reference to his work on Armenian identities during the war with Azerbaijan:

“For the Western anthropologist, observations and theories about post-socialism, whether it resembles ‘feudalism’ (Verdery 1996) or ‘neo-capitalism’ (Kideckel 1998), are both intellectually and ethically possible. For the native ethnographer, however, options are often reduced to just one – to join his or her people.” (124)

The ‘native’ ethnographer can thus get trapped in the field and unable to afford the critical presence a western researcher would be able to bring towards it. Such political commitments and identifications with the subjects of research need to be laid bare and analysed for their effects on the ethnographer’s interpretations.

While reflexivity in the conduct and interpretation of research is an important means to reveal power relations and the impact of cultural assumptions on the research process (Kuehnast, 2000), a further issue to consider is the representation of ethnographic findings to one’s readership. It is here that ethnographers often encounter major problems. On the one hand, specific knowledge about post-socialist countries may be quite limited, so that much explanation is necessary in order to allow audiences to engage with the research. At the same time, however, because ethnography often pushes the boundaries of what is taken for granted, it encounters a number of barriers in understanding and acceptance that force it to construct arguments within a framework which rarely fits its own approach. Anticipating and responding to audience assumptions in a way that does not compromise understanding yet also loses none of ethnography’s revealing and challenging insights is a tall order indeed. Ethnographers are confronted with this problem particularly when seeking to demonstrate the relevance of their work to policy makers. Yet it is the specific awareness of how political agendas are practically applied and not infrequently subverted in major and minor ways that constitutes one of ethnography’s key advantages over other approaches, as demonstrated in the work by Verdery (1999) on property restitution and Creed (1998) and Kaneff (2002) on de-collectivisation.



### *Empirical and Methodological Issues*

A number of particular empirical and methodological issues arise for ethnographic researchers in post-socialist societies, which have to do primarily with the significant pace and scale of change. Thus on the one hand they face the challenge of finding methodological approaches that are able to trace and to ‘keep up’ with often quite speedy transformations, while on the other hand in places where new routines and structures are becoming established the task is to find ways of identifying after the event what caused change, how it occurred and who has been affected in what ways.

Since many local structures have changed dramatically in post-socialist societies, it can also be difficult for a researcher to establish who the key social actors are and what roles other community members occupy. Many social networks have become so fractured and loose that researchers encounter problems in finding informants that are well enough placed to help them gain access. Barbara West (2002) describes this situation memorably in her account of transformation in Hungary. She found that “the transition from socialism created an atmosphere in which no category, concept, symbol, or reference point could be taken for granted” (3):

“It was the insecurities and fears of transition, much more than the atomizing tendencies of ‘actually existing socialism’, that caused a breakdown in the most personal communities: households, kin groups, friendship circles, colleagues, and acquaintances.” (ibid: 36)

For the researcher, this situation poses not only practical problems, but also means that it becomes harder to identify narratives that are common and coherent enough for hermeneutic analysis. In a situation where taken-for-granted concepts and ways of doing are questioned radically, ethnography cannot seek to reconstruct and critique established ‘cultural assumptions’ but needs to focus more strongly on tracing how and why new conceptions emerge and what happens to those of the past. Further, because the objects of their observations are undergoing or have undergone rapid transformation, there is the question of validity across time. Findings may quickly become obsolete and change from contemporary analysis to archival record.

Ethnographers are further presented with enormous obstacles in accessing data and records from the socialist period. Work by western ethnographers during the socialist period is sparse and was often written under conditions that demanded particular safeguards in order not to compromise respondents' and the researcher's safety. Foreign ethnographers were, and in some cases continue, to be seen as spies and most frequently did not gain independent access to research locations and informants. None the less, these researchers have produced rich descriptions and analyses of the socialist system that often depart from conceived mainstream knowledge and give us a more nuanced understanding (see Humphrey, 1983; Creed, 1998; Verdery, 1983, 1991, 1996). Ethnography conducted by local specialists in the socialist period, on the other hand, shared different research objectives and in many ways continued colonial tendencies of studying and describing the cultures of ethnic 'others' (Kandiyoti, 2002).

Today, there are still issues with the reliability of statistical and other records and some regions and places continue to be foreclosed to foreign ethnographers. They continue to experience a degree of suspicion about their work and some level of surveillance, which prevents access to certain places, records and informants (Barsegian, 2000; Zanca, 2000). Zanca describes the bureaucratic hurdles researchers may face and the difficulties of working with as well as gaining respect from host colleagues, which he argues is complicated by the often significant wealth differentials (2000: 154f).

In a context where local structures are becoming radically transformed, the question also arises as to the suitability of place-bound research. This is an issue which connects with the concerns of ethnographers, sociologists and geographers who question the validity of common notions of the local and the field at a time of increasing global flows (Appadurai 1990). George Marcus in particular has argued for a multi-sited ethnography that is theoretically informed but not overtheorised and that seeks to either follow structures, networks and relations or to trace interconnections between structures and relations from the vantage point of one intersecting node (Marcus, 1998). Such a multi-sited ethnography would discover "new paths of connection and association by which traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbols, and everyday practices can

continue to be expressed on a differently configured spatial canvas ...” (ibid.: 82). The geographer Cindi Katz (1994, 2004) has made a similar argument for the “displacement of the field site itself”, although she stays on relatively safe theoretical ground, working within a historical materialist framework where capitalist globalism provides the missing link between the different sites she has studied ethnographically. This allows her to identify power structures beyond the ‘local’ and to show how the latter is in many ways trans-locally produced, but it allows for little contestation of grand-theories on the basis of ethnographic observation and restricts possibilities for unexpected findings. Marcus, by contrast, advocates a theoretically informed ethnography that leaves room for new discoveries, where knowledge is produced through the thick description and interpretation of connections, associations and circulations. This is particularly relevant for researchers of post-socialist transformations, who work with “an emerging object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation” (ibid.: 86). Deciding where to place oneself and how to follow developing networks in the absence of a clearly defined field, however, is a challenging task, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2003) have pointed out. In seeking to understand “occult economy” in post-apartheid South Africa, they go beyond Marcus’ multi-sited ethnography to advocate engagements with multiple *dimensions* and *scales*: “an ethnography as attentive, say, to processes occurring in virtual space as to those visible ‘real’ places-under-production; to the transnational mass-mediation of images as to ritual mediations between human beings and their ancestors; to the workings of state bureaucracies or international courts as to the politics of ‘traditional’ chiefship and customary moots; to the flow of commodities across the planet as to marriage payments between lineages; and so on and on” (169f). Such an ethnography “dissolves the a priori breach between theory and method” (172), engaging the inductive with the deductive in a way that recognises the incompleteness of “theoretical scaffoldings” in relation to concrete worlds encountered in the process of research, but it also sees ‘native knowledge’ as one piece in the puzzle only, since “the local and the translocal construct each other, producing at once difference and sameness, conjuncture and disjuncture” (ibid.; also see Ferguson, 1999).

Such an approach entails a revision of ways of working ethnographically, since aspects of the flows and connections we need to explore may not be accessible *in situ*, but require movement along what Comaroff and Comaroff call “awkward scales” (2003). As Hannerz points out, this may lead to less ‘thick’ descriptions as time and effort are stretched beyond locales (2003). Interviews become the main method of inquiry and much multi-sited ethnography remains restricted to English-speaking contexts, although a thorough investigation of translocal flows and connections may well require much more varied linguistic skills. “Polymorphous engagements” (Gusterson, 1997; cf. Hannerz 2003) become typical of such ethnographies that still entail periods of research in specific sites, but where these periods are shorter and may be supplemented with “field work by telephone and email, collecting data eclectically in many different ways from a disparate array of sources, attending carefully to popular culture, and reading newspapers and official documents” (Hannerz, 2003: 212).

Such an approach, however, may highlight further the significant differences in conceptions of how research ought to be done that often exist between ‘local’ and foreign researchers. Conceptions about what constitutes legitimate or scientific research can significantly hamper the application of particular methods. In post-socialist contexts, this problem is compounded by the relative dearth of ‘indigenous’ ethnographers in the broader field of social science, since ethnographic research was conducted only in ethnology departments with a traditional focus on ‘ethnic others’. Geographers from the region tend to view ethnographic methods as alien to the discipline, making connections across epistemological divides difficult to establish. Research participants may also contest the ethnographer’s right to study particular aspects of their lives or decline support for work that they regard as unscientific or irrelevant. Of course, this is not just an issue of different conceptions of research, but often originates from difficult living conditions, where research can be seen as pointless, if it does not contribute to manifest local change for the better (Wolff, 1992, Motzafi-Haller, 1997).

### *Ethical Challenges*

This brings us directly to the question of ethics. Ethnographers in post-socialist societies, like others, need to ask who will benefit from their work and why they are conducting it. During the Cold War, research in socialist countries was often compromised by western policy interests in finding out about conditions in socialist countries, so that the suspicion of researchers being spies was not entirely unfounded. Today, the call is for ethnography to be more directly policy relevant and to improve the lives of those researched (Schneider, 2002). We would contend that ethnographers are uniquely positioned to do exactly that since their accounts are able to demonstrate how macro-policies resonate with local power structures, to show how they affect people and are negotiated by them and, importantly, to go beyond general measures of success or failure to identify more specific effects in terms of social inclusion and exclusion. Again, work on property restitution and rural restructuring here has shown, for instance, how ethnic minorities are frequently marginalised in the implementation of these policies and the differential gendered effects they are having (Verdery, 2001; Pickles 2001; Dunn, 2004; van Hoven-Iganski, 2000; Pine, 1998, 2002).

In some countries, critical accounts can still risk the safety of respondents (see above), while the difficult living conditions in parts of the former socialist world mean that the material needs of respondents take precedence over the single-minded pursuit of research aims (Dudwick and DeSoto, 2000). Zanca (2000) and Anderson (2000) describe situations in which they felt their research was compromised by needing to respond to requests for help with establishing business contacts or with promoting specific political aims. Resembling issues in Third World contexts, the problems that feminist researchers have sought to address by developing empowering and participatory research approaches (Wolff 1996), are thus compounded here by high differentials in living standards (Kuehnast, 2000; Wolff, 1992).

What these considerations make clear is that ethnography is indeed “not so much about philosophical and methodological abstractions as about political and ethical practicalities” (Smith, 2001: 25). It should and will seek to change the world, but this

involves “responsibility for one’s witnessing, and an always-open engagement of contestation and critique” (Schneider, 2002: 471).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have sought to demonstrate the value of ethnography for analyses of post-socialist change. We have argued that it is ethnography’s focus on cultural interpretation and on the specifics of how social, economic and political structures are lived and (re)produced in localised contexts, that makes it so beneficial for research in post-socialist societies. Ethnography challenges the certainty with which transition theorists of a neo-liberal persuasion have applied western concepts to the new context and with which they have assumed the possibility of a linear transgression from one clearly defined system to another. Paying close attention to the specific conditions of post-socialist change, however, has not prevented ethnography from making wider theoretical claims and connections. In particular, it contributes to reconceptualisations of taken-for-granted concepts such ‘the market’, ‘class’ or ‘civil society’, while enabling further theorisations of social change and posing questions about the validity of the models now applied in post-socialist countries for established capitalist societies themselves. On the other hand, in as far as post-socialist countries are linked into the global economy and adopt western models of governance and social organisation, much is to be learnt from existing theories of capitalism and social change. Accordingly, ethnographers who seek to make broader connections engage strongly with Marxist and Weberian approaches, with the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century social theorists like Polanyi, Simmel and Durkheim, and with ethnographic theorists such as Goffman, Garfinkel, Turner or, more recently, Bourdieu. The latter have been found particularly valuable for work that seeks to explain transformations of identities, experiences of liminality and displacement, or the relevance and transformation of notions of social and cultural capital. Recent postcolonial and Foucauldian approaches have also been applied to support the analysis of colonial and postcolonial structures across the former Soviet empire and to diagnose the varied technologies of power and knowledge through which ‘modernity’ is produced in post-socialist societies (see authors, *forthcoming*). Ethnography is thus not a call for theoretical ignorance, but an aim to constantly re-examine the value of established

theories and concepts against the background of different scenarios as well as a search for new, context-related theories.

The post-socialist situation poses a number of challenges for ethnography that we have discussed in depth in this paper. We have focused here particularly on those of a theoretical, representational, empirical-methodological, and ethical nature (Ries, 2000). While many of the problems we have outlined bear similarities with ethnographic research in other places, we have aimed to show which of them are specific for and/or intensified in the post-socialist context.

In this final section, we now wish to direct a few words to the relevance of geography for ethnographic analyses of postsocialism. We find that, despite its emphasis on contextuality and locality, the spatial construction of society often remains implicit rather than explicit in ethnographic accounts. As geographers, we feel that we can promote a greater understanding of the ways in which identities and livelihoods are shaped in relation to space and place and demonstrate how displacement and the current reconfiguration of space in urban as well as in rural areas affects people in post-socialist societies. New conceptions of place and identity, including cultural constructions of landscape, can be traced by geographers in a range of social interactions and expressive forms, such as official discourses, artistic representations, media images and everyday conversations. Geographers can place particular emphasis on the spatial interlinkages and social relationships that define territory and communities and seek out the 'spatial webs' through which life in post-socialist societies is becoming reorganised (Kalb, 2002). This implies that global links and cross-cultural connections are made more explicit and that comparisons are drawn with other contexts, such as those in developing countries. Again, geographers can make a valuable contribution here (see Bradshaw and Stenning, 2004).

For geographers seeking to adopt an ethnographic approach in their research, a few practical issues arise, however. These are not dissimilar from some of the problems outlined earlier, but the disciplinary training of and expectations on geographers can exacerbate them. For a start, post-socialist research is still fairly marginal in the discipline

(Stenning, 2005b), which can prove problematic when establishing supervisory teams or research networks including experienced colleagues with an adequate understanding of local conditions in the field. Lack of linguistic skill is a further problem (Smith, 1996), while time constraints may not allow for extensive ethnographic fieldwork. Of course, a willingness to live in sometimes quite remote places is also required, which cannot be assumed and which may be problematic for personal as well as safety reasons. Enabling geographers to overcome some of these obstacles by placing greater emphasis on language learning and making provisions for extended periods of time spent in ‘the field’ would help to provide some of the structural conditions needed for work that aims to decentre western perspectives.

If deciding not to adopt a wholesale ethnographic approach, geographers may still be able to apply some of its methods to specific aspects of their research. They can also make their work more ethnographic by assuming some of the core aims and foci of ethnography at various stages of their research (Wolcott, 1995). However, whether applying an ethnographic approach or not, we hope to have demonstrated here that the arguments and insights developed by ethnographic researchers should thoroughly inform geographic discussions of the meanings and processes of post-socialist change.

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