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SOCIETY FOR THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF EUROPE

Transitology Revisited, Or How the Trials of Postsocialism Forecast the Precarity of Neoliberal Capitalism

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As a scholar of postsocialism, I have come to understand a striking irony of history. Or, rather, an irony of the way we talk about history as and after it happens. In the fervent days of the 1990s many envisioned West Europe and the United States as models for East European political and economic transition. These days, however, the consummate hardships of the postsocialist period (eg, endemic unemployment, austerity measures, youth rootlessness, abusive labor markets) now characterize everyday life in large parts of the European Union and the United States. In light of the 2008 economic collapse and the nagging Euro crisis, I suggest that we re-evaluate the discourse on postsocialist transition. Rather than some temporary stage to be surmounted in the march toward liberal democratic paradise, postsocialism now appears to have in many ways anticipated “actually existing” neoliberal democracy. If East Europe had been imagined as a past to be replaced with a Western future, the East European transition of the 1990s and 2000s eerily seems to have foreshadowed the present of the crisis-ridden West.

In its dominant formulation, the language of transition implied a space-time in which the liberal democratic present of the so-called West was posited as the future for the postsocialist states of the East. Via political and economic reform, it was commonly supposed that Eastern Europe might possibly catch up with the West in temporal and civilizational terms. So arose “transitology,” the study of East European states in transition. Transitologists, who were chiefly economists and political scientists, built policy and offered analyses based on the assumption that the welfare state had reached its limits and that market-based solutions provided the rational course for modern democracies.

However, even when the buzz on transition was at a fever pitch, anthropologists working in East Europe tended to be suspicious of transitology. Anthropologists were keen to point out how the rhetoric of transition confused neoliberal prescription for careful description; how its zealous teleology marginalized alternative policy perspectives; how its models of reform obfuscated a more complex and contingent process of social and political change; and how its ideological optics worked to erase or deride valuable forms of knowledge produced during socialism. Indeed, during the 1990s and 2000s, anthropologists led the critical scrutiny of transitology, mobilizing ethnographic perspectives on East Europe and the institutional motors of transition (eg, NGOs, the World Bank and IMF, European Union integration) to mount a political anthropology of this world historical moment.

With the heyday of transitology now past, we can see even further errors in the logic of transition. As with earlier anthropologists working in East Europe, my own sense of the problems of transition stem from my fieldwork in the region. During my first research visits to Skopje, Macedonia in the early 2000s, city life did feel different from what I knew of urban life in the US and west Europe. On the whole, the city was poorer and standards of living were lower. To ascribe these differences solely to an East–West dichotomy, however, would have ignored the political economy of postsocialism.

In short, with the fall of state socialism, Macedonia experienced economic collapse: industries closed and unemployment spiked upward. State revenues fell and public goods and services, from trash collection to state pensions, declined. In other cases, changing norms eroded services that were still officially existent. For example, the rise of off-the-books employment meant that many people who worked would nonetheless be ineligible for retirement and health care benefits. In the place of the securities offered by Yugoslavian state socialism, transition brought waves of precariousness to Macedonia. These insecurities, rather than being



Skopje train station. Photo courtesy Andrew Graan

overcome en route to West European promise, have largely been integrated into the fabric of social and economic life for most of Macedonia's residents.

Strikingly, social conditions in the West have increasingly come to resemble those of postsocialist Macedonia. Uncannily, I have encountered recent reports, both journalistic and anecdotal, on the difficulties of getting by in the US and EU that recall situations from Macedonia's transition. For instance, the phenomenon of adult children living with their parents has been on the rise in the US according to [a May story in the Wall Street Journal](#). [Detroit's recent bankruptcy](#) cast the spotlight on so-called pension reform. [Last December The New York Times reported on](#) Spanish professionals working months without pay simply to hold onto their positions, a practice that was and remains all too common in postsocialist Macedonia. [Sarah Kendzior's criticism](#) of the prevalence of unpaid labor across professions bespeaks the expanse of this problem. Our own universities' reliance on adjunct and graduate student labor brings very close to home a similar circumstance where so many of us work several, temporary jobs that never amount to full-time compensation and benefits.

Such stories bring into focus the exploitative labor markets, management practices and overall hardships that thrive in neoliberal climates of economic insecurity. Almost all of them I first encountered in a condensed but general fashion when living and researching in postsocialist Macedonia. Thus, while transitologists might argue that Macedonia is mired in transition, I see in Macedonia a range of novel, splendid and frightening developments that respond to and shape the precarious times of postsocialism. Furthermore, these same strategies and pitfalls apply to the precarious times of neoliberal capitalism, even inside its American and European heartlands.

In the vein of Karl Kraus and his one-and-a-half truths, I contend that in the current political economy, we must read the old narrative of transition anew. West Europe in the 1990s did not forecast the future of postsocialist East Europe. The reverse is true: East Europe in transition—with degrees of abused labor, capitalist license, and shrinking social welfare—foreshadowed the future of neoliberal reform in West Europe and the United States.

Little did anthropologists of East Europe recognize at the time, but in analyzing postsocialism and its trials, they were offering ethnographic dispatches from a neoliberal future. In so many parts of the European Union and the United States, that future is now.

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