

Is There an Anthropology of Socialism?

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in rural areas but take a keen interest in those who are actually involved. They tend not to pressurize implementing agencies for results but like to be kept informed of progress. They will also ask what has happened if work appears to be delayed. A fair description of this is perhaps 'enlightened detachment'.

Were there personality clashes? Unfortunately, these arose with more frequency than I had hoped. They were sometimes very constructive. The cases relating to shoddy work are quite illuminating.

Some Maldivian staff would take great exception to others who were not performing well. The individual concerned became very unpopular. If bad work continued the person involved would be ostracized and become completely isolated. Without exception staff treated in such a way would sooner or later resign. In this way a degree of discipline was maintained.

The most destructive personality clashes occurred both within the expatriate group and between them and other staff.

Individuals cannot be blamed for this. It is

the result of the difficulty many outsiders (both from the city within the Maldives and overseas) face in coming to terms with life on these small islands. Rural Maldivians have developed strategies which primarily reduce the possibility of disputes occurring. Their lives are rather restrained. They tend not to be impetuous, demanding or aggressive. Those who cannot adopt similar strategies were bound to face severe difficulties. In two cases these led to the departure of the expatriate staff member in question. In others, work was delayed and cancelled. Thus, as mentioned previously, more developmental initiatives failed due to the involvement of outsiders than perhaps all other factors combined.

My final fear was that, as an anthropologist, I would not be successful as a manager. It is not right that I should answer this. I can only make the following general observations.

Project management was neither easy nor a task I relished. It involved, in ways for which I could never be properly prepared, making many decisions concerning people's lives. Yet, helped by the fact that there were no serious mistakes, I accepted the responsibility and often enjoyed the challenge. It gave me the opportunity to put my skills into practice and actually accomplish something tangible. This could easily be isolated because I have fortunately been able to follow the process through from beginning to (project) end.

One real benefit has been educational. All involved have participated in a learning exercise which has generally been worthwhile. Most project staff (including myself) and the communities now have greater faith in their abilities and are clearly capable of doing far more than was the case before the project started.

In retrospect, I do not think the fear concerning management skills was valid. Anthropology and management are not two incompatible skills. They can just as easily complement each other. It is possible to be both at the same time. I have had a valuable and exciting four years managing this project. Only time will tell, and the people of Shaviyani will know, the extent to which it has been successful. \square [Concluded]

Geoffrey Griffith

conferences

IS THERE AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF SOCIALISM?

The demise of so much of the socialist 'Second World' would seem to obviate the need for the anthropological study of socialism. Indeed, anthropologists were no better than other social scientists in that they failed to understand - much less predict the rapid and ongoing collapse of Marxist parties and socialist states. Some basic questions remain. How were societies with such fundamental contradictions able to reproduce themselves for so long? Why did such seemingly solid polities fall apart like a house of cards? Why did leaders so used to ruling by force give up power non-violently? Why did those who staged the attempted coup in the Soviet Union not use the tanks and guns they had at their disposal? And what is it that is being rebuilt in these 'postcommunist' societies?

These questions are relevant not only for the Eastern Europe of 1989, where Gorbachev's own reform efforts and the existence of Soviet troops were key efforts in shaping the character of these democratization movements. They are equally important for understanding what is happening in societies not subject to the 'Gorbachev effect': e.g., Albania, Ethiopia, Angola, Benin and Mozambique. China, Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea all appear to be bedrock socialist states. But their seeming stability may crumble as rapidly as did the stable, repressive regimes of East Gemany and Romania two years ago.

The theme of the 1991 conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists, convened in Cambridge last April by Chris Hann, was 'Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practice'. Papers were invited on a wide range of topics: primitive communism, Marxist tradition, empirical analyses of socialist societies, and 'comparable social experiments'. As with most broadly defined thematic conferences, the resulting 25 papers varied in both relevance to the theme and quality.

In the tradition of socialist gatherings, the ASA conference opened with an invocation of Lenin, by Aidan Southall, who noted Lenin's naiveté, elitism and authoritarianism. One is reminded of the words of Oscar Wilde: 'The trouble with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings'. Fortunately, the remainder of the evening, devoted to socialism in Britain and Italy, proved more engaging. Cris Shore explained why the Communist Party of Great Britain refused to change its name to 'Socialist': an § PGB would have been deprived of money and property originally willed to the CPGB. Sue Wright discussed how Teesside's labourist mobilization of the working class competed with the new urban left's mobilization of 'ordinary people'. Labourist policies are here equated with 'socialism'. Italo Pardo provided a description of why the PCI in Naples was

losing its natural constituency despite good intentions.

How states rule

The six papers on Africa focused on two themes: the state's attempts to impose its will in local communities, and culture and tradition as rhetorical devices or popular weapons. In Angola (Sue Fleming's paper) the state continued to control women, and in Tanzania (Pat Caplan), the gap was maintained between villagers who are 'us' and a distant, bureaucratic 'them'. Also in Tanzania, Ray Abrahams and Sufian Bukurura showed how the ruling party and bureaucracy manipulated and subordinated grass-roots vigilante groups. Socialism created both the cattle thieves and the vigilante groups to combat them.

Ralph Grillo explored how the term 'African' was employed in the ideology of African Socialism. The rhetorical emphasis on 'Africanness' helped in post-colonial consciousness raising, while 'traditions of cooperation and social responsibility' were utilized as rhetorical smokescreens for an emerging state capitalist bureaucracy.

The bureaucracy's manipulation of 'traditional culture' is not peculiar to socialist states, but may be more visible because socialist states make broader efforts to control economic and political resources. In Angela Cheater's paper on Zimbabwe, Rasta-infatuated youth use their 'culture of

resistance' against the state. The regime which began by denigrating traditional culture in the name of socialism now re-invents traditional cultural performances; it reifies patriarchy in order to foster a cult of personality.

Survivals and revivals

The two papers on China dealt with the question of 'traditional legacies'. Kwang-ok Kim provided a subtle analysis of tradition in China. The Chinese state consciously allows certain cultural expressions to appear continuous, while vigorously repressing or transforming others. The CCP folklorizes tradition in order to propound a cultural nationalism. The villagers, however, are not simply objects of state policy. They, too, manipulate weddings, funerals and ancestral worship to achieve individual or family status goals.

After two decades of fieldwork in China, Jack Potter concluded that much pre-socialist tradition has survived. Yet Potter fails to distinguish traditional survivals from resurgences in a new context. The situation in China is much more complicated than Potter's problematic of 'change' versus 'continuity'. Several distinct processes seem to be at work: the survival of cultural forms which the state has been unable to suppress, the state's resuscitation and manipulation of local cultural expressions, and the popular reinvention of traditions in new contexts. In post- Mao China, traditions can be invented. circumvented, reinvented and contrived. The resurgence of traditionalism is a result of decollectivisation. Traditions can be the work of the party, not the result of its absence.

The three papers on the USSR all dealt with the Soviet periphery and the local consequences of recent political changes. Whether it is Siberia, the Caucasus or the far north, all are witnessing the breakdown of central control, retreat of state ideological hegemony, and rise of autonomous loci of power. Caroline Humphrey describes how political decentralization in the absence of local democracy has consolidated provincial mafias in Western Siberia (the Buryat). Decline of political control from the centre combined with economic dislocations has led to economic insecurity, anomie, anti-Russian violence, and protectionist rackets. A system in collapse generates a new kind of social structure.

In Christian Georgia and Muslim Azerbaijan, Tamara Dragadze discussed the role of religion, and the prospects for religious specialists to reclaim rituals which had been 'domesticated' by the laity during more repressive times. As the nationalist project of the Caucasian republics succeeds, the overlap between religion and nationalism will disappear.

Piers Vitebsky's fascinating paper on Siberian reindeer herders deals with re-vivals rather than sur-vivals. The Evgeny traditionalist groups ally with modern, Russian 'green' environmentalist organizations against Soviet mining interests. In the Soviet far north, grassroots politics intersects with re-shamanization.

From Central Europe, Ladislav Holy analysed the Czech revolution, showing the link between intellectuals and workers, and the prominence of actors as the only intellectuals whose 'strike' could be noticeably perceived. Holy's failure to provide any comparisons to other East European revolutions, nor to note alternative explanations of the Czech events, is regrettable. Peter Skalnik, from fieldwork in a Slovak village, remarks on the 'survivals' of socialist egalitarian mentality and authoritarian political culture among villagers, viewing these as an impediment to further modernization.

Frances Pine described the triple role of Polish women: in household organization and child care; agricultural work often in the face of male absence; and their involvement in market activities. Post-socialist Poland – exemplified today in the abortion debate – is proving to be as anti-feminine as were the practices of the socialist regime.

Ethnicity and nationalism

Three other papers on Eastern Europe dealt explicitly with ethnic topics: group competition, 'nation' as construct, and the Gypsy minority. Katherine Verdery notes the congruence of social and ethnic networks in Romania. The dislocations of economic transition, inasmuch as it creates competition between social networks, will also spawn create ethnic tensions. The resurgence of traditional ethnic animosities is thus a result of economic dislocations, exacerbated by the use of raw ethnic-cultural nationalism freed of Marxist rhetoric.

Polish history textbooks were used by Zdzislaw Mach to analyse how the concept of 'nation' is projected. Mach notes the Polish tendency to overlook Poland's continuing boundary readjustments, neglect the role of Soviet hegemony, and ignore the decisive presence of German, Jewish and Ukrainian minorities in Polish history. 'Poland' is not a place or a people, but an historically and ethnically purified construct. Regrettably, Mach's paper could have been written a decade ago.

Finally in Eastern Europe, Michael Stewart discussed how Hungarian Vlach Gypsies successfully used wage labour to sustain their resistance to Hungarian social integration. The Gypsy problem has become a predominant ethnic issue in all the East European countries.

The papers on southeast Asia had a more vague connection to the themes of the conference. Grant Evans examined the limited influence of Theravada Buddhism on economic action in Laos.

Jonathan Spencer contrasted the 'welfarism' of Sri Lanka with the villagers'

cultural and moral revulsion when benefits were distributed unequally.

A final set of papers dealt with the underlying conceptual basis for socialism in egalitarianism. Alan Barnard elucidated Kropotkin's description of the Bushmen as a society of egalitarian mutual aid. Joanna Overing described how Western characterizations of Amazon groups as either collectivist or individualist reveal more about our own cultural categories than theirs. Finally, Ernest Gellner discussed one Soviet ethnologist's attempt to explain the *emergence* of primitive communism in terms of Darwinian selection for groups which shared meat. Egalitarianism is not a state of nature but a historical product.

Socialism as secular religion

In his summary comments, Keith Hart defined socialism as a secular religion based on rationality and control. Studying how these ideologies are put into practice leads us to better understand other phenomena: ethnicity and class; nationalism and internationalism; and resistance to the state using the resources of family, ethnicity and cultural revivals. Hart's concise conclusions, 1960's style polemic, and acclaim to the papers he liked best – more a pot pourri than a tour de force – made David Parkin's closing remarks seem anticlimactic in style.

Yet Parkin managed to emphasize that socialism, being an idealized system of distributive justice, contains political, economic and moral dimensions amenable to anthropological study. Socialism contains sophisticated notions of collectivism, of idealized social forms and their associated ethos. Primitive communism is the Garden of Eden and private property and classes cause a Fall from Grace. Like other cultural systems, there are heroes, villains and icons: Lenin, Marx, Stalin, Mao. There are sacred texts and official interpreters. There is the notion of infallibility, of ritual celebrations of the social order. There are icons, schisms, heresies, and religious campaigns, ideas of sacrifice for a higher order. And there is disillusionment by former members of the church. Today there is iconoclasm: flags with holes in them, mausoleums whose 'dead kings' are removed, and changes of names for streets, cities, and countries.

Not the last word

To study the culture of socialism, then, we must understand its moral and ideological dimension as much as the concrete realities of socialist or ex-socialist states. The ASA conference did not live down to Oscar Wilde's dictum, but it should hardly be considered the last word on the anthropology of socialism. Shortcomings abounded. It is regrettable that there were no papers on Solidarity, on the inner structure of communist parties, on the GDR and failed German identity, on ethnicity in Yugoslavia, on charisma in Cuba, on Latin America generally, nor on the failure of socialism in the US,

nor more on the effect of events in Eastern Europe on the various Marxist-communist sects in the West (why was 1989 the year of the bankruptcy of Western marxist parties and not 1980, 1968 or 1956?) What goes on inside the Albania-allied parties as this bastion of communism turns capitalist? Why do parties vote to dissolve themselves?

Nor did this conference contain a single genuinely comparative paper, a curious shortcoming for an anthropology conference. One might fault the organizers for taking the easy way out in grouping the papers by regions instead of by themes. One might have wished to see an outsider - some non-anthropologist big-shot in the field of Comparative Communist Studies - offer a view of the conference. The comparative study of socialism has existed for decades. The discipline, which studies Marxist parties and communist states, generates journals (e.g. Communist Studies), conference volumes, and even degrees (Glasgow) which treat under the same paradigm societies as diverse as Angola and Czechoslovakia.

In the remainder of this review, let me substitute for this missing outsider, using as a foundation my own anthropological research in Eastern Europe (Romania). In particular, I will ask the basic question: what would an anthropology of socialism entail?

An anthropology of socialism

It would entail the study of concrete socialist states as those whose political order is (was) founded upon a moral vision. Socialist states were established by party intellectuals, ideological specialists who, like intellectuals everywhere, had an enormous capacity for self-deception (as is often noted, Pol Pot's butchers arose out of Althusser's Paris). What was the nature of their vision? What made Marx and Marxism so easily applicable to all societies at the level of ideology and rhetoric?

Aside from Marxist ideology, each socialist society was forced to evolve its own national vision, expressed in the phrase 'specific historical and social conditions', 'African traditions', Titoism, 'the Albanian road to socialism', etc. How did the practice of 'building socialism' interact with these utopian visions? An anthropology of activist intellectuals, a group often discussed by observers of communist affairs and developing countries, is of the utmost relevance here. A discussion of Latin American Marxists, for example, would not be out of place, either.

A second area of interest might be called the historical archaeology of socialism. What was the nature of the revolutions and political takeovers which occurred in the period known as 'class struggle'. We have reports from participants, apologetics from 'winners', horror stories from victims, and mythologized tales and legends about how socialism was established. But we know precious little about how class struggles and

brute force combined with other mechanisms at local levels.

Museums of collaboration

We might continue this archaeology of socialism by focusing on how 'totalitarian' systems operated after consolidation of power. How did these systems passify their populations? What of the anthropology of informers, of 'secret' police, of collaboration? Fascinating memoirs are coming out by the East German STASI functionaries. No system operates on brute force alone. How did people justify their behaviour when contradictions arose? How did people learn to separate public behavior and private belief - the dissimulation so common to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and apparently China? How did parents teach their kids to say what the party wanted at school but to tell the truth at home? And why were those people who tried to eliminate this dualism, the dissidents, not just politically repressed but socially isolated as well? There are tales of courageous resistors and brave dissidents. There are mythologies and no doubt there will be founded museums of resistance. But where do we find the museum of collaboration?

Us and them

What of the social dynamics of socialist systems? Most observers have emphasized the dominance of the bureaucratic apparatus and the resistance of informal networks: the second economy, kinship, clans, friendship and religion, and of personalism in general. The interaction between 'us' and 'them', the informal communication channels like jokes and rumours, and the general relationship between bureaucracy and corruption, are all relevant here.

Anthropologists are conceptually and methodologically well equipped to explore the relationship between formal and informal structures. Socialist systems – like any other social system – persisted both because of and in spite of interpersonal networks. All too many analysts of the collapse of Eastern Europe and now of Africa – including native informants – have led us to believe that the formal system was itself a façade, an empty shell; that informalism – be it underground economy or corruption – was the reality.

In fact, the relationship between bureaucratic states and informal structures could vary according to the situation: complementary in some contexts, parasitic in others, and at still other times informal ties helped bring down the formal system. The same informal networks which prevented these systems from changing also helped bring them down: mineworkers and dissident groups tended to mobilize on the bases of family, friends and kinship. 'Us' and 'them' were social and political categories.

An anthropology of socialism could also be applied to socialist rituals and symbolism; and today the rituals of reversal in which monarchist statues of emperors on horseback replace the hero worker and busts of Lenin. Why not an anthropology of personality cults, i.e., an anthropology of institutionalized infallibility?

Our sources for socialist societies are rich in 'native informants' who attempt to give us their own analysis of 'how the system really works'. Any Western social scientist who has studied a socialist society has been told, 'You'll never understand us'. Socialist societies are full of disillusioned ex-socialists, former members of the church who attempt to expiate their sins by telling all. Western societies are full of defectors and refugees from socialism, people who must justify why they left, and/or why they didn't leave earlier. It is a classic syndrome among East European refugees that the groups who arrive earlier consider themselves morally and politically superior to subsequent waves of 'opportunists' or even 'spies'.

Revolutions and post-communism

An anthropology of socialism must also come to grips with societies in collapse and in revolution. What were the 'revolutions of 1989' really like? What do systems look like when they are 'falling apart'? How did discontent grow into social movements, and how did regimes full of secret police and apparatus of repression collapse? Why were the East European revolutions (and the recent attempted Soviet counter-revolution) so relatively non-violent? Why was the security apparatus totally unaware of the discontent or incapable of stifling it?

Finally, what is an anthropology of post-communism like? A key problem is the rewriting of history and the continuous processes of finding scapegoats for the problems caused by the transition. How is legitimacy established in societies where so many people were passive or collaborating, and where everyone viewed the state as something to be cheated? Mythologies are being constructed about moral elites, about 'who resisted first'. For example, in Romania, the top of the moral hierarchy are those few individuals who were dissidents under the Ceausescu regime; below them are those who protested the day he fell, followed by those who fought in the revolt, and finally, those now disillusioned by the present regime. Each group considers the subsequent adherents to be opportunists. Similar scapegoating processes are going on throughout Eastern Europe. Who decides to release the 'lists of informers'? Who leaks the information that a member of parliament had worked for the old regime as informer? Conspiracy theory has not disappeared. But the conspirators are different. Theories about who really controlled the attempted coup against Gorbachev are but a recent permutation of this. Of similar interest are the recent reports of hundreds of anonymous letters being sent to Russian official organs, denouncing those who secretly supported the

coup. Back in Stalin's time, anonymous denunciations were a means by which individuals used the state as a weapon in what were essentially interpersonal conflicts. The content of the denunciation letter may have changed, but denunciation as a tactic seems to show that some things have not changed in the new democratic era.

New political code words are now part of the post-communist vocabulary. 'Re-entering Europe', and being 'European' are daily fare in the propaganda of even the most peripheral of East European states. 'Democratization', 'human rights', 'civil society' and 'privatization' have taken on rhetorical and ideological functions reminiscent of 'proletarian internationalism' and 'progressive forces'. Even Mongolia's new constitution has provisions on human rights.

Boiling pot

The emergent ex-socialist states also establish a new constellations of 'us' and 'them': part of the old 'us' have now become 'them', while part of the old 'them' have become entrepreneurs. Much of the hierarchical us/them distinction has been transformed into straightforward ethnic/national/regional tensions. All too many analyses of the postcommunist transformation have dwelled on ethnic and national conflicts. Communism is metaphorized as a lid which kept the 'boiling pot' of ethnic/tribal tensions under control. Such notions – the nostalgia of pax Sovietica – recall the discussions about the emergence of 'tribalism' in post-colonial Africa. Many of the emergent ethnic conflicts are direct consequences of the transition to market economy and political democracy, just as 'tribalism' was a creature of newly emerging states.

We tend to envision the breakdown of the USSR, Yugoslavia or Ethiopia as solely a breakdown into more homogenous ethnic units. We forget, of course, that each of these smaller units is also ethnically heterogeneous. Our focus on conflict hides us from yet other enigmas. Why have ethnic Russians in the Baltic states sided with the colonized Balts against Moscow? Why were Russians defending Lithuanian secession in Vilnius? In the Baltic case, battle lines are

being drawn not between ethnic groups, but between 'democratic' and 'conservative' forces. Why does ethnicity disappear here?

A second example of the complexity of ethnicity is that of the FRG/GDR. The *Wir sind ein Folk* rhetoric of a year ago has given way to the Ossi/Wessi distinction. Unification wiped out East Germany, but created an East German consciousness.

Ethnic and national conflicts are but the most manifest examples of so-called 'traditional legacies' which have plagued the discussion of 'Comparative Communist Societies'. There is a striking parallel here with orthodox Marxism's explanation of undesirable social phenomena as 'survivals'. A decade ago, students of 'political culture' emphasized how pre-socialist characteristics caused differences in the socialist states: Czech democratic traditions, Balkan mentalities, Polish religiosity, 'Russian authoritarianism', Prussian work ethic, Romanian passivity, the Ottoman legacy, could all be invoked to explain the realities of East European societies in the same way that 'African traditions of cooperation' could explain 'African Socialism'. Today the tradition-bound explanations are of little use: Bulgarians and Russians are proving to be adept at democratic movements, and once passive East Germans and Romanians made revolutions. Some old traditions of monarchy and ethnic chauvinism, even Nazism in the old GDR, are being resuscitated and manipulated.

Two sets of survivals

Yet an anthropology of post-socialist societies has not only to deal with presocialist traditions and legacies, but (as Skalnik pointed out at the conference) an altogether different set of 'survivals': the 40 year legacy of socialist political economy, of interpersonal suspicions, of raising children not to say what they mean, of double life and dissimulation, of friendship which was intense and utilitarian, and of mistrust of all institutions connected with the state. How does one generate legitimacy in societies which operated on the premise of 'he who does not rob the state robs his

The 'problem of tradition' will thus

involve two kinds of returns: to the pre-socialist and to the more recent socialist traditions. The familiar Bulgarian refrain '500 years under the Turkish yoke' is as non-explanatory as invoking 'remnants of socialist egalitarianism'. We must explain why certain traditions are reproduced in new conditions. Why, then, do cultures return to tradition? Why do Russians, to take one example, have a resurgence in religion, together with a wave of astrology, UFOs, a monarchist fascination, and proto-Nazi movements? Discussing such phenomena as manifestation of 'change' or 'continuity' provide little help.

Take the problem of friendship and personal life generally in post-communist societies. In more repressive states, with their fear of informers, friendships were very intense, if not conspiratorial. What happens when the social utility of friendship is suddenly reduced; when one can get meat at the market instead of through contacts; when one can articulate political ideas in parliament instead of over a bottle of vodka in a deserted summer house; when friendship is emotional but not conspiratorial?

Socialist societies are indeed disappearing before our very eyes. Statues are being torn down, constitutions rewritten, countries renamed, parties abolished, flags redesigned, alliances and identities reconstituted. Marxist utopias may be passé, but new kinds of utopian visions – and visionaries – are springing up. Intellectuals with power – dramatists who are presidents – are not as ruthless as the Bolshevik intellectuals, but they resemble them in their breadth of vision. There is room for an anthropology of these visions, together with an anthropology of 'survivals', both pre-socialist and socialist.

We first begin to understand how social structures really work only after they have fallen apart. This may be the perfect moment to begin an anthropology of socialism.

Steven Sampson (Copenhagen)

POSTMODERNISM, SOCIALISM AND ETHNOGRAPHY

The 1991 ASA meeting, on the topic of 'Socialism', was just about right in its mixture of intellectual commitment and fun. It was only on the last day when we heard, in discussion, yet another plaintive query along the lines of 'how do we do an anthropology of socialism?' that something in me snapped. I felt my eyes glaze over as my thoughts turned in trepidation to what might now continue to fall on all our desks: paper upon paper, soaked in tortured aspirations to those elusive, unstaged realisms of beaming, Californian, polyphonic, dialogical textuality.

But where, you might wonder, is the link?

Well, an apparent decline of broadly Marxian and socialist analyses of the world seems already to have encouraged a number of anthropologists, directly and indirectly, into a mode of critique through lit. crit. More than this, an apparent congruence now of various populist and representational angsts, in what some might term postmodern anthropologies and post-socialist politics, has a history in which socialism and postmodernism are quite explicitly linked. An anthropology that cannot confidently get an ethnographic grasp on one is unlikely to gain a handle on the other. And those

without a handle on self-conscious 'postmodernisms' are more likely to be tempted, uncritically, into the persuasive rhetoric of their self-defeating practices. It is perhaps forgivable, therefore, if those who, like myself, were already tired of Clifford and Marcus's collection *Writing Culture*, occasionally sought, at this ASA, a quick exit.

Two brief points are offered here, therefore, as a metaphorical footnote to some of the ASA deliberations. Firstly, any query along the lines of 'how can we do an anthropology of socialism?' might seem