
EDITORIAL

ANTHROPOLOGIES OF POST-SOCIALISM / POST-SOCIALIST ANTHROPOLOGIES: ON THE BATTLEFIELD OF NARRATIVES AND IMAGINARIES

The call for papers for the current issue of *Anthropology Journal* was prompted by what seemed to me as a growing need for reflexivity in both doing and thinking *anthropology of post-socialism / post-socialist anthropology*¹. In my understanding, the proliferation of anthropological studies of the so called “post-socialist” societies in recent decades has necessitated taking a fresh critical look on the theoretical contributions, terminological perplexities, and methodological challenges of anthropology as practiced in Central and Eastern Europe today. The title of the call – “What was Post-socialism, and What Comes Next?”, making a straightforward reference to Katherine Verdery’s seminal book, which has undoubtedly left a lasting imprint, was meant as a teaser as much as a point of departure.

My aspiration as a guest editor of this thematic issue was to put together submissions which would contribute to the ongoing discussion over the uncertain future of *anthropology of post-socialism* viewed as an anthropological sub-discipline, as a kind of ‘area studies’, or perceived more pessimistically as a ‘dead-end’ scholarly endeavor.² Reviewing these discussions along with the controversies surrounding the term itself³, regrettably, is far beyond the scope of this editorial. What needs

¹ The two terms – ‘anthropology of post-socialism’ and ‘post-socialist anthropology’ – are not used here as synonyms. Clearly, anthropology of post-socialism is ‘post-socialist’ by default, but ‘post-socialist anthropology’ does not necessarily focus on ‘post-socialist’ societies. The reason I pair them here together is that they seem to share similar theoretical, methodological and epistemological challenges, moreover, they are produced under similar conditions of knowledge production.

² On the recent debates about the future prospects of anthropology of post-socialism – see, e.g., Baer 2014, Benovska-Sabkova and Krasteva-Blagoeva 2014, Červinková 2012, Červinková, Buchowski and Uherek 2015, Chari and Verdery 2009, Gallinat 2022, Giordano, Ruegg and Boscoboinik 2014, Hann 2014, Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2001, Kojanić 2020, Sárkány 2002, Thelen 2011.

³ On the use and relevance of the term ‘post-socialism’ in anthropological studies – see, e.g.,

to be acknowledged, however, is that the papers we received, although making valuable contributions to the anthropological scholarship on post-socialism, hardly ventured in this direction. Most of the authors, in fact, appeared to be somewhat reluctant to question the status of their field of study, the power relations and the ‘hierarchies of knowledge’ permeating it⁴; neither would they challenge its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, nor engage in the debate over the relevance and usefulness of ‘post-socialism’ as an analytical concept today. As much as I am still convinced that critically examining the conditions of knowledge production in the field of *anthropology of post-socialism / post-socialist anthropology* is a worthwhile albeit arduous task, I shall leave it to future endeavors.

I have, nevertheless, come to notice that there is yet another, all the same interesting, common thread running, to one extent or another, through all the papers included. Studying the ‘battlefield’ of narratives and imaginaries related to a number of diverse social issues – reproduction and gender relations, corruption and informal practices, perceptions of Europeanness, democracy and the post-socialist transition, parenting and policy on children, raising native breeds of farm animals – comes to the fore both as a theoretical approach and as a methodological tool employed by the authors.

The battle of narratives appears most prominently in the paper of **Nacho Dimitrov** who studies the narrative strategies (“tricks”, as he calls them) applied by farmers in their struggle to get funding – narratives aiming to valorize the endangered native breeds of farm animals they raise as “cultural heritage” and to present themselves accordingly as “guardians of Bulgarianness”. Looking at valorization as an instrumental-rational social action, Dimitrov identifies and outlines a number of “ideal types” of narratives – about breeding as a personal cause, about native breeds as an element of national identity, about the authenticity of the breed, and about the competence of the breeder – which are all analyzed as performatives, i.e. as speech acts of perlocutionary power, aimed at generating symbolic capital, which in turn can be transformed into economic capital.

Narratives of corruption, along with informal practices and legacies of societal distrust in post-socialist societies take center stage in **Anna Antonova’s** paper. Based on her extensive fieldwork conducted on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast over the last seven years, Antonova, “a child of the post-socialist transition” herself, draws upon Ivan Krastev’s proposition that “narratives of corruption serve a broad-sweeping function as commentary on politics and society” and develops it further. As her findings suggest, the prevailing “culture of distrust” (Giordano and Kostova 2002, Luleva 2021) associated with the “rupture of legality and legitimacy” (resulting from, among other things, the controversy-ridden privatization and land reforms in the early 1990s) has fostered a powerful metanarrative allowing her respondents

Chelcea 2023, Kideckel 2014, Martin (2021) 2023, Massino and Wien 2024, Mihăilescu 2014, Müller 2019, Ringel 2022, Rogers 2010.

⁴ On the ‘hierarchies of knowledge’ in the anthropology of post-socialism – see, e.g., Buchowski 2004, 2012, 2014, Čapo 2014, Iliev 2017.

to address the contentious issues related to the coastline's post-socialist development, malfunctioning environmental governance practices and the ensuing sense of dispossession and environmental injustice.

Imaginarities rather than narratives come under the spotlight in the contribution by **Roberta Koleva** – the only author in this issue who boldly delves into the discussion on the usefulness of the term ‘post-socialism’, advocating for its spatial and temporal relevance in contemporary anthropological inquiry. The paper examines the broader social imaginaries pertaining to “Europeanness”, “democracy”, and the post-socialist “transition”, as they are translated into divergent narratives evoked by the dismantlement of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia in December 2023. The monument itself, seen by liberal anti-communist activists as “the Bulgarian Berlin Wall”, serves as a point of reference in the narrative of what the author refers to as “standby transition” – a teleological progress-based narrative of the ongoing, i.e. never-ending, transition of the country to an imaginary state of being truly “European”. As the author compellingly illustrates, this narrative has been strongly challenged by the voices of those opposing the monument's toppling down – elderly communist activists, leftist academics, far-right groups (paradoxically resorting to anti-fascist rhetoric), as well as younger people with personal sentiments towards the site of the monument.

The clashing views of nationalism and (radical) feminism on reproduction, gender roles and family stereotypes are critically examined in **Elena Petkova-Antonova's** paper. Based on a case study of the ambivalent public reactions to the “Do It Now” media campaign targeted at promoting fertility and reproduction in Bulgaria, her analysis focuses primarily on the visual narratives employed. The campaign's use of nationalist rhetoric coupled with a pronouncedly patriarchal discourse on women's rights and reproductive choices clearly reflects the recent trends observed in Bulgarian society. At the same time, as the author has convincingly argued, the explicitly scathing reactions to the sexist, nationalist and ethnocentric messages of the campaign offer a “testimony to the increasing public sensitivity, empowerment and activism of both civil organisations, and citizens in general, in defense of women's rights in Bulgaria”.

Angelina Ilieva's paper analyzing the media discourse surrounding the National Child Strategy (2019 – 2030) provides another insightful case study into the workings of social imaginaries. Drafted in 2019, the strategy unleashed a series of protests and speculations among parents voicing their fears and anxieties about Bulgarian children being potentially stolen or subjected to sexual abuse and organ trafficking, allegedly made possible by the strategy's provisions – a narrative which came to be known as “the Norwegian conspiracy”. Undertaken from a classic anthropological emic perspective, the analysis carefully scrutinizes narratives and narrative elements (motifs, images, tropes) articulating the parental fears induced by the strategy. The author introduces an apposite differentiation between the old and the new “demons” of public imagination, as she refers to them, the former – grounded in folklore beliefs and legends of child abduction, sexual perversions and ritual

murder, whereas the latter – based on the notions of the totalitarian state and its repressive apparatus, embedded in the collective memory of post-socialist societies.

The two book reviews featured in this issue complement the papers in a most befitting way. **Velislava Petrova**'s book *Otpadakat kato resurs i vaobrazhenie. Anthropologichni perspektivi [Waste as a Resource and Imagination. Anthropological Perspectives]* (2023), meticulously outlined by Atanaska Stancheva, presents the findings of the first comprehensive anthropological study of the politics and culture of waste in post-socialist Bulgaria. Roberta Koleva's outstanding analysis of **Dimitra Kofti**'s *Broken Glass, Broken Class: Transformations of Work in Bulgaria* (2023) highlights the book's contributions to the anthropology of labor, post-socialism, and global capitalism. As Koleva underlines, the author's decade-long ethnographic field study of the Mladost glass factory in Sofia, "is not only a careful and detailed exploration of labour transformations in post-socialist Bulgaria but also offers a nuanced lens on how global inequalities interact with local conditions, fragmenting workers and reshaping social identities that were once united but are now fractured".

My observation of the all-pervasiveness of competing narratives and imaginaries in this issue's submissions would most certainly not hold valid for *anthropology of post-socialism / post-socialist anthropology* at large, as it is based on a limited and relatively random collection of papers, but it appears nonetheless indicative. What is more, one is compelled to bring up the question of whether it is exclusively a structural feature of the "post-socialist condition" as such (which seems highly unlikely), or simply the outcome of the methodological and theoretical predilections of the researchers whose work is presented here. Or, if we dare to generalize it even further, could it be an overarching methodological trend gaining momentum in present-day anthropological inquiry?

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