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Extending the reach of 'post-socialism': A commentary

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Abstract
In this Commentary, I bring together the findings of the articles in this special issue, and advocate for an expanded temporal and spatial application of the concept 'post-socialism'. My focus is also on the ongoing political and ideological value of the concept as a useful emic and analytical means for critiquing capitalism.

Keywords
post-socialism, spatial-temporal relevance, political-ideological associations

For many anthropologists of post-socialism, there comes a time when it seems necessary to critically reflect on the concept of post-socialism and question its continued relevance. In my case, this happened when British migrants started buying up houses in Bulgaria and moving to the country, many permanently. As part of this general trend that began in the first decade after 2000, some three families moved into village Talpa (where I have been conducting research since the 1980s) and they remain there to this day. Talpa, and the rural district in which the village is located, had never been on the radar as a place of interest for western tourists. Thus the arrival of these foreigners was more than just a little surprising – not only for me but for local villagers too. It demanded some explanation. The community's population had been in decline for a number of decades (as in so many rural places in Bulgaria) and young Bulgarians, especially, show no interest in living in such areas. Yet the village, and the region more generally, had become the preferred site, and a deliberate choice, for migrants from Western Europe! This raised questions concerning traditional studies on migration that problematise the flow of human mobility from East to West, while the opposite flow of migration is often ignored (Kaneff, 2009). More relevant for the theme of this volume: the migration of British families to rural Bulgaria brought

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together West and East in a way that seemed an aberration when considered in terms of the concept of 'post-socialism'. 'Post-socialism' is not simply about making sense of processes of change following the collapse of socialism but, more specifically, about the reforming of socialist states into capitalist political-economies, based on the assumed economic and political superiority of the latter over the former (and capitalism's promises of greater development, modernisation and individual freedoms). Given this particular trajectory, how can we explain the fact that people from the capitalist West were showing their preference by relocating to such places, places that were expected to 'catch up' with Western ideals and practices? The British migrants themselves spoke of their attraction on the basis of the stronger sense of community and the preferable lifestyle of this 'post-socialist' location when compared to life in Britain. Undoubtedly Bulgaria was also economically attractive – at least to those downwardly mobile westerners (who constituted the main bulk of the property buyers in rural Bulgaria) who could live much better on their incomes/wealth in a lower cost country.

British migration to Bulgaria raised questions with respect to the conventional spatial and temporal associations of post-socialism: where 'post-socialist' is no longer designated a spatially separate region of Europe (because westerners had moved in) nor a temporally negative zone (since British migrants showed a preference for this supposed 'less developed' area). The migration of westerners to Bulgaria also suggested that wider processes were at play (Kaneff, 2013), processes rooted in more global influences than those that could be accommodated by the 'regionally' restricted term of 'post-socialism'. The problem presented to scholars working on the incorporation of former socialist states into the capitalist global economy is one of finding a means of taking into account the distinctive features of former socialist countries while not losing sight of important similarities with other places in the world (Hann et al., 2002: 9). At any rate, 'post-socialism', as originally referring to a particular and separate geographical and temporal zone, no longer seemed an adequate term and required rethinking.

In her Introduction (this volume), Gallinat cogently lays out the main theme of this collection: the legacies of the 'post-socialist' concept for anthropology. It is a theme explored in different ways by the contributing authors of the collection, who are concerned with questions relating to the legacy of the concept, and its present and possible future value. These questions are not new, having been posed for almost two decades (e.g. Hann, 2002). They remain ongoing and different perspectives have been expressed. The authors in this volume all take the position that the concept still has value. Nevertheless, various scholars have highlighted the concept's limitations (e.g. Buchowski, 2004; Hann, 2006; Thelen, 2011, and others) and some have advocated its abandonment (e.g. Müller, 2019). An alternate option to abandonment might be to recognise the restricted usefulness of 'post-socialism' as an explanatory device and, on this basis, advocate for its far more strategic usage: to be made use of only when talking about contemporary (and future) processes where the past, in some form, is still a significant feature; whereas other more appropriate terms could be used when the focus lies beyond or outside of the post-socialist remit. (This distinction is of course largely analytical as it is difficult to imagine any situation where the past does not influence the present or future.)

The articles in this volume present us – as I see it – with another option: to extend the reach of the term. It is through focusing on different 'remnants' of socialism that the authors find entry points for thinking about contemporary 'post-socialism': abandoned rusting infrastructures; government policies designed to 're-educate and transform' former socialist citizens; national devaluations of socialism that stigmatise groups of people and regions, and that, in turn, drive migration; and the maintenance of various buildings, societies and associations established in socialist times that continue to this day. Such 'reminders' do more than reference a socialist past in the present, they also shape contemporary social relations and practices, as well as influencing perceived futures. In adopting such a position the articles in this volume use the concept differently from how it was initially applied. They all show ways in which the term can be and needs to be extended or rethought … as we would expect of any social science concept that needs to 'keep up' with the changing social realities which it seeks to capture.

Changing relevancies of the term can best be tracked through the emic trail. If people distinguish between a 'socialist' and 'post-socialist', then as anthropologists we cannot ignore this. Often such distinctions are subtle. In Brega, the village in Ukraine where I work, the dramatic changes following the collapse of the USSR are discussed frequently in conversations to this day, mostly obliquely, through the use of the word 'before': '*before* it wasn't like this' or 'we were better off *before*'. We all know what 'before' signifies; not one of the 90% of the former collective workers in the village who lost their jobs in the privatisation of agriculture since 1991, nor any of the 25% of the total village households affected by the loss of family as a result of migration are in any doubt as to what 'before' refers to. Perhaps the case of Ukraine is particular in that reforms have been dragged out over three decades. In many countries (institutional) reforms progressed faster and were 'completed' in relatively far shorter time frameworks, so to all intents and purposes, explicit verbal references to the reforms are not as common today. Yet there are many more subtle ways in which reminders of socialism and post-socialism remain; even in the cases of countries where reforms were apparently quick and 'thorough'. The articles in this collection reveal some of these more subtle material and non-material forms by which socialist referents exist and shape contemporary social relations. As long as such references, explicit or implicit, continue to be part of the everyday lives of people in all manner of different contexts and occasions, there is a strong argument for anthropologists to portray this in their work.

Below, I will highlight the two main ways – as I see it – in which the articles in this special issue are calling for a modification and extension of the 'post-socialist' concept: through temporal and spatial changes. It is in expanding these two dimensions of the concept that the authors of this collection argue for the continued value of the term.

Spatial extensions

'Post-socialism' can be extended spatially to incorporate places not often associated with socialism. Previously, the term was restricted in its usage to refer to the particular territories which officially self-designated themselves as 'socialist' in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (as well as some other select locations in the world). However,

various scholars have argued for the spatial extension of the term (e.g. Hann, 2002; Rogers, 2010; Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008 among others). A couple of the contributions in this volume develop this position, showing that the term can be extended beyond its traditional spatial confines. Aet Annist's article takes the argument in one such direction. She shows how Estonian 'post-socialist' nation-building is founded on distancing the contemporary state from its socialist past. The ongoing political-ideological importance that is, by default, given to socialism in the present, has negative implications for certain groups and regions within Estonia that are stigmatised by close associations to socialism – as is the case for rural regions and their inhabitants. In these areas, social connections have crumbled and social deterioration – 'social dispossession' – is a result of the ongoing devaluation of the regions and their people. The solution for many is international migration. However, such mobility has not always provided a satisfactory exit strategy, especially for those doing low-skilled work; for while escaping national devaluation, the migrants find themselves assessed on the basis of a global hierarchy where the West is always given superior value and Estonians, as 'East Europeans', are always less valued in comparison. As Annist shows, Cold War global hierarchies continue, and the only real upscaling possibilities for Estonian migrants occur when they return to their native land, where associations with 'the West' provide them with some social and economic capital.

Migration provides one means, then, for the designations of 'post-socialism' to be spatially extended. It brings together East and West spaces, and demands consideration of both in order to understand present-day post-socialist relations of decline and devaluation. 'Post-socialism' as an analytical tool helps explain global hierarchies, the particular form taken by Estonian nationalism as well as regional devaluations. At the same time, the ideological devaluation of 'post-socialist' spaces and people remains evident at all these analytical levels, with real and negative impact on people's lives.

The article by Robert Deakin and Gabriela Nicolescu provides another way in which the post-socialist concept can be extended. In this latter case, the spatial extension provides a more radical and ideological break from previous uses. What the authors do is situate socialism both in the West and East through a comparison of two different socialist practices – the collective production of traditionally embroidered blouses in Romania and the construction of social housing in England. While I have some hesitations in the comparison of these two particular – and very different – 'remnants' of socialism, I am totally convinced by the argument that a fruitful comparison of socialisms in different sites can be made if our focus is not so much on state forms but on state practices. No one who has lived in different countries in Europe can help but notice the striking similarities between, for example, council housing in Britain (I have in mind here the high rise buildings in Birmingham or London) with blocks of housing found in East European sites. Similarities are evident not only in architectural design, but also in terms of the spatial arrangements and constitutive social landscapes. This suggests possibilities for a fruitful comparison. Deakin and Nicolescu extend the relevance of the '(post-)socialist' concept by showing the parallels in socialist practices irrespective of geographical location. That is, via their British/Romanian comparison, the authors de-territorialise socialism,

reminding us that the concept '(post-)socialist' need not be geographically restricted to former socialist states.

Expanding the concept spatially by turning our gaze on socialist practices in capitalist states allows us to break free from the (ideological-political) connection between eastern Europe and socialism; that is, we can move away from the Cold War imposition of an ideologically laden understanding of geography. At the same time, a 'global' (post-) socialism can be advocated. We do not hesitate to speak of a global capitalism in terms of comparing similar practices/policies implemented in different parts of the world; why not also acknowledge socialism as having a similar global reach, thus giving it broader comparative value? After all, the neat Cold War ideological division that spatialised the world into First, Second and Third worlds was never a reflection of reality; capitalist and socialist practices are found in all countries, in much the same way that no one region operates purely through markets or purely through centralised forms of distribution; both forms of exchange (and others) exist in different global contexts in different balances and arrangements.

The two articles – the one by Annist and the one by Deakin and Nicolescu – considered alongside, show not only the ongoing relevance of the (post-)socialist concept, but also the need to extend its spatial parameters. In both cases the extension is carried out by revealing the relevance of the concept outside of the East European space; either through following migration and mobility paths, or by recognising that similar socialist practices also have a long tradition in western 'capitalist' contexts. The former continues to ground 'socialism' in East European identities/figures; the latter breaks down the traditional ideological association, by highlighting the appropriateness of the concept for countries designated 'capitalist'.

Temporal extensions

A straightforward reading of post-socialism designates transformation as a linear representation: 'post' denotes a concern with what happens after socialism. However, the three remaining articles that make up this volume focus on the temporal signification of the term, arguing that post-socialism presents far more complicated possibilities: it does not signify one (linear) temporality but rather can be a referent for multiple temporalities. In different ways, Stefan Dorondel, Felix Ringel and Anselma Gallinat are pushing for a temporal extension of the concept to accommodate the multiple and sometimes ambiguous temporal realities that potentially can be explored through the 'post-socialist' concept.

Stefan Dorondel's article focuses on agricultural infrastructure to show how it remains relevant and continues to structure social relations in the present. He describes the transformed landscape of the Romanian Lower Danube floodplains resulting from privatisation and abandonment of (socialist) state drainage infrastructure, which is too expensive to be operated by the new private landowners. The latter thus find themselves at the mercy of 'nature', with rises and falls in water rendering their land unusable at various times. Significantly, the present landscape is not a return to the pre-socialist days, before the drainage infrastructure was built, when locals worked with limited land and economic

activities were oriented to fishing rather than agriculture; nor is the present landscape similar to socialist days, when the drainage and canal systems opened up far more land for agricultural production than is presently available. The changing 'presence' of infrastructure provides a way to examine the new landscape and corresponding changes in local economic practices. More importantly, for our purposes, multiple temporalities coexist through the presence or absence of infrastructure – and its use and non-use – serving as a local connector of the past and present, as well as raising concerns about survival in the future.

Multiple temporalities are also explored in the two articles that are concerned with Germany. Resonating with the Estonian case (Aet Annist, this volume) is the German case, where the legitimation of capitalism and devaluation of socialism – through the stigmatisation of certain locations and particular groups of citizens – is intricately bound up with the process of the building of a new nation state. In this case, however, the devalued Other is not rural spaces and rural inhabitants (as in the Estonian case), but former East German regions and their citizens. Further, in the German case there is an added challenge, as the unity of the country – West and East – is at stake.

Felix Ringel's focus on socialist reminders provides an arena for exploring how post-socialism is used to problematise time through its multiple meanings. He designates as 'determinist' the views that present socialism as the root cause of post-socialist problems (a stance he attributes, for example, to West German media). This position is different from local (East) German perspectives, which view current problems as having been generated from changes that have taken place *after* the fall of socialism. The examples of residential flats, clubs and associations, and ideas about urban planning and development, provide a means for exploring the ongoing value of socialist 'references' that are used to comment on – if not critique – determinist views. Such referents are potential sites for ideological alterity; they provide politically charged arenas from which negotiations in the present about the present, and concerning the future, are made.

This same theme of discrepancies of views relating to (post-)socialism is also developed by Anselma Gallinat in the context of government officials responsible for the transformation and 're-education' of East Germans, whose inability to engage 'properly' in 'democracy' is perceived by state officials as rooted in wrongly held (positive) beliefs about socialism. In this case, the confrontation is between powerholders, on the one hand, who see socialism as the ongoing source of problems in the former East and, on the other hand, those who are seen to hold on to nostalgic views of GDR times, or in some way display attitudes perceived as rooted in 'socialism'. The struggle is played out in temporal terms – where the local population is devalued as an internal Other. Such a devaluation is achieved by powerholders who, through their beliefs about the inferiority of previous socialist social formations, cordon off the socialist past from the 'modern' 'contemporary' and 'democratic' capitalist present. We see again, not a linear temporality but present-day 'sites' where different understandings of the past are being negotiated on a daily basis in the contemporary period.

In both these articles on Germany (and Annist's Estonian case as well), the ongoing politically-ideologically loaded nature of the post-socialist concept comes to the fore: national unity and the legitimation of power depends – still – on the continued devaluation

of those sites and people associated with the former East Germany. (There is here reinforcement of Chelcea and Druta's [2016] argument concerning the winners of the transition using the socialist past as an ideological device to discipline their populations [see also Borelli and Mattioli, 2013: 11].) The internal Other – defined in terms of associations with socialism – in the German case, bears witness to the ongoing relevance of the post-socialist term and its ideological and political significance. To this extent, Cold War ideologies are reinforced, and dominance maintained by those whose desired endpoint/goal is 'capitalism'. This might be the official position of powerholders and nation-states, but on the ground alternate views are evident: among those who still see the value in socialist housing, or who recall the better social services provided during socialist times. Thus, while (post-)socialism remains an arena at the centre of political-ideological tensions, alternative views to (and of) capitalism exist. Domination is as much temporal as spatial. Yet, while there is a 'discussion' about (post-)socialism there is also a possibility for critique … and hegemony remains an elusive capitalist dream.

Concluding thoughts

The articles in this special issue indicate that the term 'post-socialist' not only has an important legacy but can also have contemporary relevance and value through extending its spatio-temporal reach. It may well be that earlier uses of post-socialism have been limited, based on relatively narrow spatial and temporal boundaries. However, as society transforms over time so must the concepts used to analyse change. Post-socialism can be a dynamic and accommodating concept, or at least there is room for expansion, modification and review of the way the term is used in anthropology in accordance with what is happening in respective sites on the ground. As people's concerns change, and as the reforms go beyond institutional change, and as the effects of three decades of neoliberal policies reveal growing social inequalities and political disenfranchisement, other more subtle ways in which (post-)socialist influences are present become apparent. The correlation between disillusionment with neoliberalism and ongoing references to post-socialism are perhaps not coincidental. In any case, the term's relevance continues, but in a different way from its earlier uses.

The contributing authors in the collection suggest that post-socialism, as a concept, can offer a far more sophisticated set of insights, and is far less straightforward than how it was previously employed. It is a complex, messy and ambiguous term. Indeed this is part of its ongoing usefulness and potency. It is a concept that references multiple temporalities and also integrates many spaces, applicable far beyond the limited boundaries of former socialist and Soviet states. Recent critiques highlighting the limitations of the term – its emphasis of rupture over continuity, its territorial boundedness, its political disempowerment and its emphasis on the past rather than the future (Müller, 2019) – are, I think, refuted by this collection. Despite the many changes and transformations in former socialist states – or perhaps because of them – (post-)socialism remains a reference point for many. As long as this situation persists, the term will continue to hold theoretical, analytical and empirical interest for the anthropological discipline and the social sciences more generally.

This volume is not alone in arguing for the ongoing significance of the post-socialist concept (e.g. see Borelli and Mattioli, 2013; Chari and Verdery, 2009; Chelcea and Druta, 2016, from very different perspectives). However, the particular way in which I understand that these articles present their arguments – via an expansion of the spatial and temporal reach of the term – presents an important contribution to the collective academic discussion.

In finishing, I wish to highlight two points that arise from the articles and their call – as I see it – for an extended application of the post-socialist concept.

First, as long as (post-)socialism is referred to by (former socialist) citizens, as long as it continues to be one key reference point, then it cannot be ignored. We need to be alert to the fact that in many sites – such as those discussed in this volume – verbal or explicit references to socialism may be less frequent than they were three decades ago. Even in such cases, however, points of orientation to socialism are there: in the presence of buildings, in the unused and used infrastructure, in the social organisations, practices and spaces that directly or indirectly still exist and have meaning for people. While socialism continues to be a benchmark for shaping relations in the present, and perceptions of the future, the concept's analytical value continues and needs to be given consideration.

Second, in many contexts, the importance of the term is in its political-ideological associations and uses (emic and analytical). The Cold War is not over; it has simply shifted its terms of engagement. It has moved beyond the initial and explicit border/Iron Curtain barriers, and beyond the export of western institutions (Kalb, 2002; 324), and now, as the articles in this issue suggest, it continues in a more subtle but nevertheless real form through ongoing expressions of temporal and spatial domination. Post-socialism is a useful tool for exploring these forms of domination: it can be used strategically in the emic context and can be a site of contestation between different political positions (more than just a historical condition, it can also serve interests and have strategic value). Further, these different positions can be explored critically through analysis. 'Post-socialism', with its multiple significances, provides a means of examining these ongoing political and ideological tensions, both emically and also analytically (as a tool for the critical reflection on western forms of capitalism). Perhaps what is necessary is greater clarity and precision in how the term is used: if it is of emic value – for whom and how is it being used (the state, powerholders, ordinary citizens) – and/or if it has analytical value (by whom is it being used – academic, policy makers, the media – and with what purpose in mind, etc.)? Through all these possible uses, (post-)socialism remains a focus for political struggle, an arena for the ongoing clash between sponsors of capitalism and socialism; as evidenced in the cases of Estonia and Germany, where socialism is problematised (in very different ways) in public and official domains of social life. While ideological tensions remain and powerholders in capitalism continue to see socialism as a 'threat', and constitute it as a 'problem', and while capitalism is seen as the desired endpoint, then '(post-)socialism' will continue to be a useful concept with which to engage.

In so far as post-socialism continues having some explanatory value – emically and etically – then there is a case to be made for its continued use. What these papers show is that there is little to be gained from abandoning the term and much to be lost. Instead, the term needs to be rethought and reinvigorated through expanding its spatial reach (to

include and incorporate states beyond self-designated former socialist states) and temporal complexity (as a term that accommodates multi, and not simply linear, temporalities). And always we should be guided by the emic context and local voices. The comparative importance of 'post-socialism' as a concept that allows contemporary exploration of certain places which are seen to share a distinct (socialist) past has been convincingly argued by Humphrey (in her section in Hann et al., 2002). With the opening up of the concept, in the way suggested by the articles in this volume, new paths of comparison become possible, while some of the identified problems fall away. In this sense, this collection highlights not only the important legacy the term has made to the discipline of anthropology but also its present relevance and, indeed, its future potential.

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