



Towards dialogic post-socialism: Relational geographies of Europe and the notion of community in urban activism in Bratislava



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1. Introduction

Some 25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, 'Western' and 'Eastern' Europe have seemingly merged into one unit. As a result, the popularity of post-socialism as a conceptual tool and marker of difference is fading. Yet, numerous striking differences across the West-East axis of Europe have surfaced, including tensions and contrasting attitudes between Eastern and Western Europe towards issues such as the Refugee Crisis in 2015 (Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2016; Ágh, 2016), the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (Klinke, 2015a; Loftus & Kanet, 2015), LGBTQ rights (Binnie, 2014; Pitoňák & Spilková, 2016), and intra-EU migration (Careja, 2016; Cowley & Kavanagh, 2016).

This paper seeks to reinvigorate post-socialism as an analytic tool for addressing these new cultural and political geographies of Europe. We object to those who have proclaimed 'the end of post-socialism' (Ferenčuhová, 2011), and suggest approaches to temporality and spatiality that carefully attend to diversity across the West-East axis of Europe, as well as within these regions in times when such differences are gaining new geopolitical importance. To achieve this, we suggest that the existing academic focus on economic inequalities and academic production of knowledge under post-socialism, needs to incorporate the production and mobilisation of knowledge from a range of everyday domains. Consequently, we argue that the prevalent *dialectic* notion of post-socialism needs to be replaced by a *dialogic* (following Sennett,

2012) one, that resists resolution, closure and fixed ontology.

This argument is exemplified through a critical discourse analysis of the ways in which the notion of community has recently been mobilised in urban activism¹ in Bratislava, Slovakia. This empirical material is placed within a wider narrative in which we track how community has (or has not) been deployed in post-socialist politics. While the notion of community is an important concept in politics and governance in the West (Day, 2006; Delanty, 2010; Joseph, 2002; Rose, 1996; Young, 1986), it has attracted less attention in Eastern European political discourses. Now, with its gradual deployment in that region, we track the importance of commonalities, links, but also dissonances and tensions between discursive politics in the West and the East. We conclude that similarities and differences between these two regions can be explained by neither a 'transition' of the East towards mimicking the West, nor by essentialist discourses of cultural and political difference. Instead, we find that the political field in which the concept of community is appropriated and mobilised, is produced through a range of interplays between factors from various spatio-temporal domains and scales.

We begin this paper by articulating a critique of the dominant dialectic approaches to post-socialism and by formulating an alternative, dialogic perspective. We then apply this dialogic approach to the discussion of the dismissive attitudes that are expressed towards the notion of community in Eastern Europe. This wider critical review is then supplemented with a case study that offers a critical discourse analysis of the deployment of community in contemporary urban activism in Bratislava.

2. Towards dialogic post-socialism

Post-socialism was initially introduced as a *temporary* project. Neoliberal (Sachs, 1994; Åslund, 2002) and neoconservative (McFaul, 1993) approaches that dominated early debates, highlighted institutional transitions and a reduction in diverse

¹ We use the term activism in a loose manner, and apply it to non-state activities that seek to bring about change. Their scope can range from a local neighbourhood to tackling global issues. As such, the participants in the projects we analyse might not necessarily identify themselves as activists.

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developments in East and Central Europe (ECE) to being different stages of the wider project of global liberal capitalism. Emphasising political-economic perspectives, media and policy establishments in *both* Western and Eastern Europe have promoted a narrative in which ‘all roads lead to the West’ (True, 2003, p. 1). This position suggested that the difference between the regions is of degree (of transition) rather than kind, and post-socialism is then reduced to a transitional concept of convergence towards liberal capitalism. The emerging social scientific critique (e.g. Bridger & Pine, 1998; Hann, 2002; Verdery, 1996) countered this teleological notion of difference and emphasised the importance of lived experiences and inequalities. Yet, only a few authors (Hörschelmann, 2002; Stenning, 2005a) have problematized the transient nature of post-socialism. The chief conceptualisation of post-socialism evolved from dialectic understandings of change, in which remnants of socialist infrastructure interacted with their antagonistic responses, producing (even if through diverse routes) cohesive and ‘maturing’ economic, political, social, and cultural orderings, resembling and catching up with their counterparts in the West (see Smith and Pickles, 1998, for a more detailed statement and critique of transitional approaches).

The idea of post-socialism has lost in prominence as the institutional transitions meant to bring ECE closer to the West have largely been accomplished (Pickles, 2010; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2006). However, these institutional transitions have not only seemingly brought the East and the West closer together, they have also accelerated mobilities (Burrell, 2009; Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2014) and economic and cultural engagement across the EU (Gawlewicz, 2015; Matejskova, 2013). Yet, some striking differences across Europe persevere while new differences have emerged. Economic disparities within the EU have featured prominently in policy and media debates (Hörschelmann & van Hoven, 2003; Marksoo, Białasiewicz, & Best, 2010; Pittau, Zelli, & Gelman, 2010), but a rise and reinforcement of contradictions in social and cultural identities and politics has also taken place (Moisio et al., 2013; Sellar & McEwen, 2011). The ‘culture of survival’ (Bridger & Pine, 1998), declared as a defining but *temporary* feature of the earlier stages of post-socialist transitions, is nowadays recognised by the poor in the East as a *permanent* facet of the post-socialist condition, attached to neoliberal reforms and macroeconomic policies, many of which have been inspired and pushed to the fore by Western institutions (Bohle, 2006; Stenning, Smith, Rochovska, & Swiatek, 2010). In turn, this has triggered resentment in the East towards the geopolitical order represented by the EU and other Western institutions (Polyakova & Fligstein, 2016; de Vries, 2013). As we suggested in the introduction, responses to some of the key recent events in Europe indicate an emerging drift apart between the West and the East, and gives us cause to investigate whether ECE can be viewed as part of ‘an unproblematised [concept of] “Europe”’ (Stenning, 2005b, p. 381; also; Klinke, 2015b).

Stenning and Hörschelmann (2008) argue that, with the focus on North-South relations in critical academic debates, lesser attention has been given to ECE, including some of the most ‘marginal spaces [...] *within* Europe’ (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008, p. 315). We contend that it is time to again focus on differences across Europe and that a (re-)new(ed) conceptual basis is needed that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism, whether in seeing the West and the East as birds of a feather or as polar opposites. We view such a basis as still being grounded in the concept of post-socialism, but moving away from dialectical views of transition. First, it is imperative that thinking through post-socialism reflects social experiences in Eastern Europe as relational across manifold geographical and historical links, not viewed as isolated and existing on their own (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). Studying the West or the East has to recognise their *inter-* and *intra-*relations,

as well as the academic context from which this scholarship emerges (Klinke, 2015b). Second, while there is a need to decouple post-socialism from the grand transitional narratives originated in the West, its reconstruction must not neglect the impacts of major institutional forces, especially the EU (Clark & Jones, 2008). Such reflections will require identifying the interplay of these macro-institutions with non-institutional elements, such as embodied mobilities (Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2014), new and emerging notions of difference (Flemming, 2012), popular culture (Moisio et al., 2013), multiculturalism (Matejskova, 2013), and historical legacies of nationalism (Young & Light, 2001).

Third, much more consideration must be given to the comparative geographies of knowledge production and mobilisation *between* and *within* the West and the East. By this, we do not only mean critical reflections of the academic production of knowledge about the East, that have been repeatedly enunciated (Domański, 2004; Ferencuhová, 2016; Hörschelmann & Stenning, 2008; Timár, 2004). Rather, such a critique has to be developed hand in hand with insights into the wider geographies of knowledge. Both Domański (2004) and Timár (2004) have suggested that with the overwhelming focus on economic disparities between the West and the East, less attention has been given to the cultural marginalisation of ECE. Critical insight into the geographies of knowledge production and mobilisation *within* and *beyond* academia is thus central to understanding the positioning and role of such marginalisation in the shaping of new geographies of Europe (Moisio et al., 2013; Pickles, 2005). We therefore assert that more attention needs to be given to the impacts of various power geometries on the politics of *knowledge* in all areas and scales of the social life, including but certainly *not restricted* to academic or other forms of institutional forms of knowledge. As highlighted by Stenning and Hörschelmann (2008), post-1989 processes in ECE *can* be read (and *are* read by some) through the lens of decolonisation and neo-colonisation, as countries of ECE, ‘having extracted themselves from the Soviet Empire, [...] find themselves part of neo-colonial discourses of globalization and Europeanization’ (p. 324). Crucially, here we can see the importance of a relational reading of the emerging discursive formations in ECE, that resist the ‘objectification and essentialization’ (Kuus, 2004, p. 483) of the East and of post-socialism. Such a reading has to be situated in the context of de/neo-colonial power dynamics – of reconciliations with the socialist past, whether through anti-communist counter-narratives or through a nostalgic renaissance and reconstruction of socialism (e.g. Czepczyński, 2008); and of the impact of global economic and political agendas of the ‘western’ institutions, such as EU, NATO, IMF and the World Bank (Kuus, 2004) – but it cannot be reduced to them.

Our ensuing conceptual proposition is to move away from the dominant *dialectic* notion of post-socialism towards a *dialogic* one. Following Sennett (2012), we understand the dialectic approach as departing from the holistic socio-political condition of the socialist past that is contested and penetrated by its liberal-capitalist contradictions. Dialectic thinking dissolves socialism into complex institutional and socio-cultural transformations, so the post-socialist transition can be read as a *reaction* to the past. The past gradually ceases to matter and becomes submerged in the dialectic process in which a new condition is formed and formulated. The identity of such new constellations is distinctively different from the past, eradicating the singularity of socialism at some point. As socialism is no longer present, post-socialism is no longer relevant. In contrast, Sennett (2012) builds on Bakhtin (1986) to formulate the idea of *dialogism* which offers no resolution, fixation or closure, and problematizes binary relations that often envelope narratives about post-socialism, such as the source and the response, the good and the bad, or the dominant and the marginal. Bakhtin suggests

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