



Postsocialism

DOMINIC MARTIN, *University of Oxford*

The collapse of the socialist societies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union drastically changed the lives of millions of people and offered a new and exciting field of research possibilities. 'Postsocialism' emerged as an interim term to describe the lives of people who had formerly lived under socialism. Some scholars of postsocialism assumed a quick transition for these societies to neoliberal forms of government and economy. However, postsocialism did not simply follow on from socialism, and socialism did not simply go away. Key postsocialist works indicate that postsocialist forms of being were established well before socialism's political demise. Similarly, some of socialism's material forms and social norms continued and have proved to have a resilient afterlife. The confident assertion that socialism's fall signals the 'end of history' has been challenged by philosophy and by events. This entry surveys the roots of postsocialism as an anthropological concept, and interrogates the concerns as to its long-term viability as an organising category for the study of societies becoming more diverse as they distance themselves from their socialist pasts. However, the former socialist societies have provided a range of rich anthropological research opportunities for scholars and continue to afford unique insights into key areas of ethnographic and theoretical interest. One possible future for what is still called postsocialism might be its amalgamation with postcolonialism, as a new hybrid area of scholarship, focused upon societies whose histories and ideologies challenge the hegemonic narrative of neoliberal modernity.

Introduction

The crisis and collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the last decades of the twentieth century unraveled the political, economic and social structure that governed the lives of more than a quarter of a billion people. A whole civilization and ideology was laid prostrate for dissection and enquiry (Benjamin 2003: 391). For Western scholars, this offered a cornucopia of new fieldwork openings and access to hitherto unavailable, sometimes unimaginable, sources, as well as the chance to collaborate with institutions and scholars from behind what had been termed the 'Iron Curtain'. For social anthropology, the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe signalled a potential period of [ethnographic](#) innovation and theoretical renewal through tapping a relatively unexplored geographic area, comparable to the Amazonian and Melanesian heyday of the previous two decades and of Africanist anthropology before that. In the absence of any more apposite consensual designation, postsocialism emerged as the default descriptor that gathered together what has come to comprise an extensive and significant body of writing and research. Postsocialism reflected the unmaking of a whole world system and the refashioning of ordinary life in the teeth of global modernity, across a geographic and sociological [landscape](#) stretching from the Baltic to the Sea of Japan, from the Arctic Circle to the border of Afghanistan, and encompassing a diversity of social identities from nuclear engineers to nomadic [hunters](#).

Anthropologists working in this field seized the rare, perhaps unique, opportunity, exploring the then-current and developing theories and fields of anthropological interest: [ontology](#) and time (Buck-Morss 2000, Bernstein 2019); personhood and identity (Yurchak 2006, Kharkhordin 1999); environmental [precarity](#) (Brown 2013, Petryna 2013); economy, exchange, and property (Humphrey 2002, Verdery 2003, Hann 2002, Morris 2016); [ethics](#), power, and sovereignty (Hemment 2015, Ledeneva 2006, Glaeser 2011, Dunn 2004, Zigon 2010); modernity and globalisation (Pomerantsev 2014, Collier 2011, Shevchenko 2009); religion and spirituality (Rodgers 2009, Lindquist 2005, Luehrmann 2011, Caldwell 2004, Wanner 2007, Pedersen 2011); borders and migration (Reeves 2014, Pelkmans 2017, Bloch 2017); [race](#) and gender (Dzenovska 2018, Ghodsee 2018); and emotion and [affect](#) (Oushakine 2009, Pesmen 2000, Lemon 2018); that is, most of the topics and theoretical ‘turns’ that have exercised the discipline since the 1990s.

However, from its very inception, postsocialism was regarded as a flawed, albeit necessary, yet always temporary resort for scholars. It provided a category home for a range of scholarship across a very wide field of research that was dynamic and, although united by some degree of common ideological and political [history](#), ephemeral and fissile almost by definition from the moment of socialism’s collapse. Thirty years on from that commencement, the assumptions and aporias that attended postsocialism’s conceptual initiation have long been overtaken by time and history. A generation has passed, and the rising generation has no experience, and little memory, of actually existing socialism. The binary oppositions of the Cold War have been replaced by a polymorphous, fragmented relationship between the West and the former socialist societies and polities, whose postsocialist complexions range from the actually or aspirationally [neoliberal](#) (Latvia, Croatia) to so called ‘illiberal democratic’ (Poland, Hungary) to the still resolutely Brezhnevite; that is, tied to ossified late Communist political forms (Belarus, Turkmenistan).

‘The end of history’ (see below) has come and gone. Socialism still persists in various incarnations as a powerful political and economic challenge to late capitalism and liberalism. The span of this entry does not encompass the vigorous or moribund socialisms that remain: China’s ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, the strident Neo-Leninism of North Korea, the various hybrids that flourish or fail in what used to be called the ‘Third World’: Vietnam, Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba. Despite its deficiencies, postsocialism as a concept continues to have purchase and meaning for anthropology, albeit as an increasingly retrospective, historical category, which refers to an interim period that is passing—and may indeed have passed—but which has borne witness to and analysed momentous changes. Postsocialism provides a context that increasingly interdigitates with other ‘post’ epistemologies, including post-industrialism, post-modernism, post-structuralism, and, perhaps particularly, [post-colonialism](#). From wars in the Balkans, in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in the Southern Caucasus, to the emergence of revived Russian nationalism under Putin, the anticipated transition from ‘stagnant’ (Bacon & Sandle 2002: 2) collectivism to a neoliberal dawn has yet to come to fruition for many in the former Soviet space. Premised theoretically on an assumption of a quick and easy

transition to the freedom and prosperity of the market economy, postsocialist transformations in actuality happen within ongoing conflicts, both collective and individual. They often set the advocates of economic and political neoliberalism against a reluctant population whose security (both economic and social), imaginaries, and very identities remained inextricably linked to the previously existing socialist order. Postsocialist anthropological work has, over the past thirty years, provided ethnographical and theoretical substance to the argument that the historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernising tradition that its supposed defeat at the same time calls into question the whole Western narrative of triumphant liberal capitalism (Fukuyama 1992: 48). In order to analyse or even simply to characterise postsocialism within the restrictions of an encyclopaedia entry, this entry focuses primarily upon subjectivity within the former Soviet space, for two reasons. First, subjectivity can be considered the paramount concern of socialism. Karl Marx, at the very outset, emphasised the priority of social being over consciousness (1978: 4). Boris Groys dismisses the suggestion that economics or politics were the essence of socialism (2009: xx); rather, he asserts that 'The Soviet Union understood itself literally as a state governed by philosophy alone' (33). Hence, second: the focus on the Soviet Union and its successors. The Soviet Union was the source and origin of the socialist project, and as it moved through its Cold War high point towards its decline, after *perestroika* (the Soviet political and economic restructuring of the 1980s), it is arguable that it had taken the project of making socialism further than any other society before or since (Groys 2009: xviii).

Surveying postsocialist anthropological thought as it has developed, this entry will first discuss the emergence of particular forms of postsocialist subjecthood within an epoch often periodised as 'late socialism', and the spectres that persisted beyond communism's widely proclaimed demise. Next, this emergent postsocialism will be analysed by considering some of the issues and ideologies that were contested in the 'end of history' debate. Finally, details of four case studies of the postsocialist self will be examined. In summary, this entry will claim that although socialism as a hegemonic political system may have ceased in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the socialist project continues and the socialist present remains. In this sense, the countries of the former Soviet Union remain postsocialist until today; the socialist project remains as a palimpsest upon which is scripted contemporary political and social orders (Martin 2008). Socialism persists as the penumbra under which particular subjectivities and forms of being-in-the-world continue to emerge and develop. The anthropology of postsocialism has excavated this landscape, which is simultaneously a site of mourning, haunted by the spectres of communism, and a vibrant *post*-hybrid engendering new perspectives, challenges, and solutions within the narrative(s) of modernity. Derrida's neologistic concept of 'hauntology' is useful to deploy as a tool to frame and analyse these phenomena (1994: 63). Hauntology means that ghostly presence by means of which the past returns or persists. Hauntology captures how the time(s) of postsocialism are a heterogeneous multiplicity, a 'heterochrony' that cannot be adequately described with reference to dualisms like presence/absence or before/after (see Ssorin-Chaikov 2006 & 2017).

Spectres of the (post)socialist subject

The collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union happened, to some degree, like Ernest Hemingway once famously described the process of going bankrupt: ‘Two ways. Gradually, and then suddenly’ (1954: 136). There is an uncanny echo of this sense in the title of Alexei Yurchak’s [ethnography](#) of the sensibilities of Leningrad’s young communist activists (so-called *komsomoltsy*) and of its avant-garde on the threshold of the collapse. In *Everything was forever, until it was no more* (2005), Yurchak describes a rolling crisis of language and knowledge that came about in the last days of the Soviet Union which indicated that the epistemic conditions of socialism were progressively running aground. He argued that the ossified, hyper-normalised, and highly citational nature of late Soviet culture caused its participants to focus, following J.L. Austin’s theory of speech acts, on the performative dimension of language rather than on its constative dimension. Life under late Soviet communism was marked by a decoupling of language and reality. Yurchak calls this, in Austin’s terms, a ‘performative shift’ which applies to the years that followed the [death](#) of Stalin, the time of Khrushchev’s so-called ‘Thaw’ (*otтеpel’*), and the ‘Stagnation’ (*zastoi*) of the Brezhnev period, when the teleological imperative of the development of socialism was undermined, and effectively sidelined, by a focus upon the achievements of the present and the struggle against its binary capitalist nemesis. From then on, it was more important ideologically to match the consumer economies of the West than to pursue the ultimate goal of true communism. Here begins the ironic self-referential and essentially postsocialist posture adopted by the intelligentsia which Yurchak identifies as *vnye* (simultaneously *inside* and *outside* of the epistemic regime of state socialism). He also highlights the habitus of *obshchenie*, a self-reflexive group solidarity, a determined coming-together that produced a common inter-subjective sociality. This narcissistic condition is even more explicitly demonstrated and excavated in the case of East Germany by Andreas Glaeser (2011) who argues that as the 1980s went on, socialism’s claims to superior insight lost their credibility at an accelerating pace. The unfulfilled promise to *know* better than its Cold War adversary played a significant role in socialism’s demise.

Although there had been a small but significant body of Western ethnographic research undertaken in actual socialist societies prior to 1989 (Caroline Humphrey’s *Karl Marx Collective* [1983] and Katherine Verdery’s *National ideology under socialism* [1991] are two notable examples), in the first wave of postsocialist scholarship, the construction of a specific socialist subjectivity became an early important, indeed necessary, theme that was taken up principally by [historians](#). Stephen Kotkin (1995) Yuri Slezkine (2000), Igal Halfin (2007), Katerina Clark (2011), and Vladislav Zubok (2009), all reflect on aspects of the creation of a particular form of subjectivity and social consciousness. Kotkin in particular, in *Magnetic mountain*, his magisterial micro-history of the crucible of Stalin’s First Five Year Plan—the trans-Ural steel city of Magnitogorsk—emphasises the emergence of the Komsomol, a consciousness-creating Soviet youth movement, custodian of the ideals of Leninism, within whose ranks zealots would learn to think and to

‘speak Bolshevik’ (1996: 236). Sheila Fitzpatrick designates this new social identity as ‘Homo Sovieticus’ (2000: 32).

This exemplary personage, whilst indicating the [ethical](#) task of [self-]creating a heroic class-conscious subject fit to forge and inhabit the communist utopia, also later acquired a parodic dimension that it gained in the Brezhnev era from Soviet satirist Alexander Zinoviev (1986). Zinoviev uses the epithet from the perspective of the metropolitan intelligentsia to poke fun at the so-called *sovok*, the once idealistic but by then somewhat lumpen, somewhat credulous, former ‘shock worker’ who had constituted the vanguard of the proletariat and peasantry in the period of High Stalinism. *Sovok* becomes during late socialism a slang term for a slavish kind of Soviet philistinism, emblematic of the low-brow, plebeian [values](#) of the ‘working class’, often used alongside a term for rude and uncultured collective *bydlo*, a herd of cattle. This stereotype was forever immortalised by another satirist, George Orwell (1951) in the character of Boxer, the honest, honourable, but stolid and gullible shire horse that [labours](#) for no reward in *Animal farm*. Like the debasement over time of the [revolutionary](#) ideal in Orwell’s parable, so by the time of the so-called ‘stagnation’ under Brezhnev — which according to Yurchak is when the ‘performative shift’ begins to hollow out the discourse of socialism — the symbolism of the Soviet New Man has become ironic while *sovok* has become the self-deprecating signifier for these stereotypically pejorative traits of Soviet personhood and already threadbare, discredited Soviet values (it is a play on words: *sovok* also means ‘dustpan’).

A powerful ethnographically informed perspective on the Stalinist ideal of Homo Sovieticus is presented by Jochen Hellbeck (2006) who reads the diary of a zealous young Komsomol activist, labouring under the guilty secret of his bourgeois origins in late 1930’s Moscow, to illustrate the self-transformative and self-awakening power of Soviet revolutionary ideology. The rigour with which the young zealot approaches the task of fashioning a Stalinist self reflects the ‘dream’ of socialism:

...a Soviet dream, the contours of which the party ideologist Nikolai Bukharin delineated in implicit rivalry with the individualist American dream. In [this] Soviet dream, socialism turned soulless workers, oppressed by capitalist exploitation, “into collective creators and organizers, into people who work on themselves, into conscious producers of their own fate”, into real architects of their own future. (Hellbeck 2006: 6)

This maximalist Soviet prometheanism gives rise to a fundamental anthropological problem, as a result of which anthropologists of postsocialism have been necessarily as interested in the histories of high Stalinist ideology as they have in the ethnographic details of everyday existence in Siberia or Silesia. Until Soviet socialism, humans had arguably never engaged in such a self-reflexive, self-conscious, and theoretically informed attempt to make themselves anew on such a scale. Scholars of postsocialism have thereby been constantly haunted by the question: to what extent did such an experiment in all-embracing collective self-

making succeed, and what were its unintended consequences and legacies? Andreas Glaeser has provided an acute analysis of this process of subject formation as it applied under the East German experience of socialism:

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the party's understanding boiled down to the hope that if only everyone would internalize the teaching of Marxism-Leninism, while sincerely acting in accordance with them, socialism would realize itself in an ever more perfect way (2011: 61).

Given the headlong quality of the momentous events of 1989 and the period immediately after, it is unsurprising that the earliest phase of wider postsocialist scholarship reflected an element of what has come to be called 'transitology' (Hann 2002, Sachs 1990) – an assumption that former socialist societies would progress towards forms of liberal capitalism without exception or regard for the social cost. This approach and indeed this phase of scholarship has been criticised by later scholars for projecting its Western-oriented assumptions, its Manichean perspective upon the shortcomings of a 'defeated' ideology, and its supposed deviations from 'human nature'. Transitology has been justifiably accused of suffering from the same kinds of teleological assumptions which it levelled at socialism (Hann 2002, Dunlop 1993, Derrida 1994). By contrast, the first wave of postsocialist anthropological [writing](#) (Hann 2002, Humphrey 2002, Verdery 2003) held a focus on what late socialism was, and how individuals, communities, and institutions reacted and evolved in the *khaos* (chaos) of its deconstruction and refashioning. Indeed it is with some justification that Chris Hann (2002) claimed that '...anthropology provide[s] the necessary corrective to the deficits of 'transitology''. (Hann 2002: 1) This critical integrity has continued as postsocialist scholarship in its more mature phase has excavated the mundane building blocks with which the total anthropological project of forging a new human type in Soviet modernity was assembled.

Stephen Collier, in one of the most important works of postsocialist anthropology, *Post-Soviet social* (2011), has shown how the continuities and ruptures in the (post)socialist subject, including its various incarnations mentioned here (Homo Sovieticus/*sovok/vnye*), are imbricated within the [infrastructures](#) that were built to realise the socialist utopia. He details the policy of structural adjustment ('shock therapy'), which had profound implications for postsocialist countries' economies, including the effective abolition of the mechanisms of planned production, controlled prices, and collective property, all of which seemed easily dismantled—at least to some Western observers (Verdery 2003). But Collier's analysis focuses on the different schools of [neoliberalism](#) and shows how the shock therapists' initial attempt to deconstruct socialist institutions of industrial coordination, social welfare, and urban planning was thwarted in part by the obdurate material legacies of socialism. Leading architect of the shock approach, American economist Jeffrey Sachs, argued for the 'reallocation....of resources in the economy' (Collier 2011: xii). These so-called 'resources' effectively comprised the communities, social institutions, industrial and [financial](#) processes, factories, and human networks that made up the fabric of collective life across nascent postsocialist society. Collier's focus upon the Soviet-era communal heating system that sustains the industrial city of

Belaya Kalitva, which stubbornly resisted desocialisation, provides an example of a postsocialist assemblage that persists from the socialist past and impels socialist values and material structures into the period of assumed transition and beyond. Collier asserts that the ‘surprising’ (2011: 22) persistence of the systems and the material infrastructure of socialism require them to be questioned or analysed, in order to parse the ‘social’ that inhabits the heart of postsocialism. He concludes that later neoliberal reforms in the 2000s (inspired by the work of another US economist, James Buchanan) did not reject the basic value-orientations of Soviet social modernity. Rather, they aimed to find a new balance between economic efficiency and social welfare, between the mechanisms of enterprise and choice and the substantive constraints imposed by socialism’s continuing legacy of social norms and material forms.

We see how the legacies of the *sovok*/Homo Sovieticus and Soviet social modernity converge (often to tragic effect) in the collapse of the highly structured collectivism of socialism that is the direct fall-out from ‘shock therapy’. This crisis has been documented in a rich seam of ethnographies that examine homelessness and destitution (Höjdestrand 2009); despair and loss among veterans of the Afghan War and their families (Oushakine 2009); premature mortality and the crisis of [masculinity](#) (Parsons 2014). The crisis of masculinity exposes a gendered postsocialist afterlife of the Soviet ideal: the Stakhanovite masculine toilers, glorying in their physicality and embodying the ideals of collective solidarity, found themselves without a role in the fast-moving, fluid 1990’s, other than as so-called *sportsmeny*, providing hired muscle for the burgeoning mafia (Humphrey 2002). Premature mortality amongst men of working age reached epidemic proportions: much of the attrition was down to abuse of alcohol. What had been valued in the *sovok* foundered in an [atmosphere](#) where anything goes (*bespredel*). This Russian word is generally linked with the climate of *khaos* in the early 1990s. It literally means ‘without boundaries’, and designates the spirit of abandon and lawlessness that prevailed in those days.

As Michelle Parsons describes in her ethnography *Dying unneeded*, men’s risk-taking was not sufficiently counterbalanced by any order. When the Soviet state fell, men turned to drink to experience a lost sense of social belonging, as well as a sense of power to push against what bound them. Unfortunately, not much bound them. Responsibilities that ordinarily served to limit excessive drinking were diminished. Men pushed further and further before finding limits. Working class men suddenly rendered unneeded by the state were most at risk, especially if they were also unneeded at [home](#). Women fared better, according to Parsons, since their sense of neededness was more diffuse and included, importantly, being able to hold their families together in times of hardship. This very quality of [resilience](#) re-emerges in Alexia Bloch’s (2017) later postsocialist ethnography of female migrant entrepreneurs discussed below. More broadly, Jeremy Morris (2016) has documented the ways in which working class individuals of both sexes, their families, and communities, through a process of bricolage and a continuing memory of the social ‘dowry’ of collectivism—what Morris memorably describes as ‘...their own social resources held in common and emerging from a shared (and proud) past’ (2016: 11)—confronted this unpredictability and insecurity of

daily life. They found ways to make postsocialist existence if not 'comfortable', then 'habitable'. Similarly, Elizabeth Dunn (2004) has chronicled how factory [workers](#) in postsocialist Poland, manufacturing baby food for a US-based global conglomerate, found strategies to [resist](#) being 'privatised' in their subjectivities as well as economically. These Polish workers were denied coeval status by their new neoliberal [colonisers](#) much in the same way that previous anthropological hegemony imposed the 'ethnographic present' (Fabian 1984: 81) on assumed 'others'.

The end of which history?

In the late summer of 1989, in the tumultuous months leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama published his celebrated article 'The end of history?', later expanded into the volume *The end of history and the last man* (1992). He argued that a consensus across the world now agreed upon the supremacy of liberal [democracy](#) as a system of government. It had overcome rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently and pointedly, communism. In addition, Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy embodied the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government, and as such constituted the 'end of history'. That is, while earlier forms of government were characterised by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was free from such fundamental internal contradictions. Notwithstanding current injustices or social problems present in Western democracies like the United States, these problems were ones of incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which modern democracy is founded, rather than of flaws in the principles themselves. Underpinning his argument, Fukuyama drew extensively upon the emigré Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojève's exegesis of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy of [history](#), in particular his 'dialectic of the master and the slave' set out in the *Phenomenology of spirit* (1977). Fukuyama further invoked Friedrich Nietzsche's 'last man', the inheritor of the world beyond the end of history who embodies but cannot realise Hegel's master's urge to dominate and achieve recognition and renown. Again reflecting his reading of Kojève, Fukuyama asserts that this 'last man' is none other than the [neoliberal](#) subject, living in the boring but prosperous liberal democratic societies that have seen off Marxist tyranny, whose epigones will occasionally lapse into religious and nationalist retrogressions and fundamentalisms, only to find out again that, indeed, 'there is no alternative' to liberal democracy.

In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida delivered a spirited rebuttal of Fukuyama's 'neo-evangelistic' theorising, and the 'obscene euphoria' with which it was lionised by neoliberal capitalist politicians, media, and academia (74). Derrida critiques Fukuyama's sleight-of-hand wherein he conflates the *empirical* actuality of history with the *ideal* assumptions that construct the *telos* of economic and political neoliberalism, granting to himself, as it were, the dialectical best of both worlds. Derrida continues that the whole problem with the Fukuyama/Kojève 'simplified - and highly Christianized' (1994: 77) version of the

'end of history' is the way it thinks of time/history, namely in a positivist sense as a succession of present moments, counted one after the other on the rosary of 'homogenous empty time' (Benjamin 2003: 397). This made for bad metaphysics as it leaves no room for 'the event', for those unsettling intimations of the future that are woven into the present.

The liberal democratic triumph of the 'end of history', which, according to Derrida, dismisses the possibility of the 'event', already has had its effective comeuppance since Fukuyama delivered his 'secretly worried' polemic, both from outside shocks (9/11, the 'War on Terror', global [climate crisis](#), COVID-19), and from internal earthquakes (the [financial](#) crash of 2008, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter); a 'triumph that has never been so critical, fragile, threatened, even in certain regards catastrophic, and in sum bereaved' (Derrida 1993: 85). An equally suitable or even better candidate for Kojève's 'last man' might rather be the postsocialist subject himself, whose overlapping incarnations were outlined in the first section; he who is heir to the 'dowry' of socialism, who, depending on perspective, could be both *sovok* (a self-satisfied philistine consumer) and live *vnye* (an intellectual creating niches of freedom in a eternally fixed system).

Alexei Yurchak observed (along with others, such as Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia) the emergence of an aberrant postsocialist subjectivity in the last Soviet generation, a postsocialist subject who took form within and lived under the socialist regime, the *postsocialism within socialism*, so to speak:

During late socialism, especially in the 1970's and early 1980's, it became increasingly common among some groups of the last Soviet generation, especially children from intelligentsia families, but also some from working class backgrounds, to give up more sophisticated professional careers for occupations that offered more free time. The more extreme and telling examples of such jobs included boiler room technician (*kochegar*), warehouse watchman (*storozh*), freight train loader (*gruzchik*), and street sweeper (*dvornik*). These jobs kept them busy for only two or three night shifts a week, leaving them plenty of free time for *obshchenie* and for pursuing other interests. One's obligations were minimised because the work was undemanding, because it was organised in long shifts with breaks in between, and because one was spared the need to attend meetings, parades, and other public events (since only people with stronger institutional affiliations were, required to attend such events through their jobs). (2005: 151-153)

Yurchak's postsocialist subject, for whom '*Everything was forever*' and who could express individuality whilst having sloughed off economic necessity, seems more faithfully to resemble the posthistorical figure foreseen by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kojève than Fukuyama's impostor. It is this antiheroic figure that is given the task of forging the postsocialist future, always already secretly preparing and prepared for the event '*Until it was no more*'. That future is not simply a future that is a version of the here and now, but rather a future that develops the forces active in the here and now to conclusion; not a mere *future present*, but rather a future modality of the *living present*. It is for this reason that it is impossible to

dissociate socialism from postsocialism: they cannot be conceptualised simply as ‘before’ and ‘after’.

Four exemplars of the postsocialist subject

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, fieldwork in the former socialist societies remains a vibrant and popular option for a new generation of anthropologists, and a more authentically future-oriented form of postsocialist [ethnography](#) is beginning to emerge. Rather than rehearsing the triumphalist teleological vision of defeated, subaltern societies expected to ape and aim at catching up with Western [neoliberal](#) capitalism, these works provide views into the rear-view mirror of subjects and societies either confidently accelerating away from their experience of socialism, or, more likely, shifting in the direction of a distinctive version of modernity. In the first wave of postsocialist anthropological excitement, all of the themes and interests listed at the start of this entry have been addressed in ethnographic monographs. All of this work reflects a particular perspective, which is filtered through the prism of socialist experience, identity, and [history](#). This final section will focus on four recent anthropological works that continue to accrete meaning into and give flesh to the concept of postsocialism as history goes forward. These texts highlight social phenomena that have distinctively postsocialist contours; either absent in other social contexts or more visible or more progressed in postsocialist societies. The key index of this postsocialist substance in each case is that the solution paving the road forward to modernity is stalked by the ghostly presence of an ideology that refuses to die.

Several anthropologists of postsocialism have undertaken work in areas related to the ethical formation of postsocialist subjectivity. Working under the broad influence of Michel Foucault’s theorising of neoliberal governmentality, they have pursued the basic thesis that with the collapse of socialism and the retreat of its welfare state, individuals have been forced, incited, and invited to govern themselves in new ways. Often, these biopolitical technologies or discourses come from the West, but not always. One example of this approach is Tomas Matza’s (2018) exploration of the rise of psychotherapeutic practices in Russia in contradistinction to the previously established psychological and ethical framing of Soviet upbringing. This development straddles the collapse of socialism. It dates back to the time of *perestroika* when economic stagnation prompted Mikhail Gorbachev to call for educators and institutions to attend to the ‘human factor of production’ (Matza 2018: 78). In response, reformers promoted a shift from ‘averaged’ to ‘personality-oriented’ education, and a ‘more democratic and child-centred approach’. Emotions became a relevant area of educational concern, initiating the psychologisation of upbringing, which had previously been conceived of in [moral](#) terms under the tutelage of Anton Makarenko, the father of Stalinist pedagogy who developed the disciplinary techniques that promoted the formation of Homo Sovieticus (Kharkhordin 1998). This change was not essentially about individual [children](#) achieving success or wellbeing; the late-socialist reformers had in mind a form of success that was ultimately to be measured in collective terms. The acknowledgement of an individual interior life that ought to be nurtured for its own sake had always been

contested under socialism, just as had the notion of ‘private’ life. A generation later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Matza found during his fieldwork in Putin-era St. Petersburg that a distinction had emerged between two different psychotherapeutic approaches: one oriented towards adolescent dysfunction and pathology, another much more targeted upon wellbeing. He established that depathologising forms of [care](#) that focused on well-being were generally much more available to the better-off. Rather than pathology, these forms of psychotherapy promoted highly market-oriented and gendered concepts of personal success and advancement. Matza observes that biopolitics (techniques used to govern populations as living beings) often relies on moralising and draws subjects into state aims by constituting them as caring subjects. This observation reinforces the notion that ethical projects are not antithetical to neoliberalism; on the contrary, they are central to it.

The physical environment that socialism created and inhabited played a significant role in the formation of subjecthood on both sides of the fracture and collapse of socialist societies. This was particularly pertinent in Hungary, long regarded as the most Western-oriented and prosperous of the so-called ‘satellites’ of the Soviet Union in the period of late socialism. Here, as elsewhere across that social landscape, planners understood that materiality and political ideologies were linked, and that transformative powers might inhere in material forms. The aesthetics of domestic environments, the shape, texture, and ambience of their materiality, provide the locus for Krisztina Fehérváry’s (2013) exploration of the reciprocal relationships between ideology (of the state, market, or particular groups), things (residential housing, furnishings, and aesthetic styles), and people (especially people’s embodied experience). She elucidates how radical changes to people’s lived environments and their experience of those environments transforms or challenges the sociopolitical ideologies with which they are aligned. She particularly highlights how, in the sphere of interior design and domestic aesthetics in Hungary but also more widely across both the East and West, the trend towards using ‘natural’ materials—of, effectively, bringing ‘nature’ inside—gained powerful [affective](#) appeal with the end of the Cold War and its corollary, the demise of the socialist welfare state. She observes that the superiority ascribed to ‘natural’ materials—granite countertops, rich hardwoods, stone-like tile backsplashes, and leather furnishings—aids in discrediting modernist projects and generates the cosmologies that have replaced them. These cosmologies valorise the moral project of being in harmony with the natural world and at the same time allow for the naturalisation of the free market as arbiter of human value. The search for ‘quality’ in material goods that are more healthy and durable, i.e., more ‘natural’, is inextricably linked to the production of inequality. Drawing upon the Peircean concept of ‘qualisigns’, she traces the decline of the Cold War style of ‘socialist modern’, characterised by angular, modernist design, lightweight furnishings, light colours, and man-made materials, once emblematic of the triumphantly modernist communist future and defined by qualisigns of ‘lightness’ and ‘cleanness’, into a debased parody she defines as ‘socialist generic’. In Hungary, this style’s defining products—shoddy, factory-made, and mass-produced apartments and furnishings—became aligned with and reinforced the affective experience of alienation from an impersonal and oppressive [bureaucratic](#)

state, whose physical identifiers echoed the same tropes of stagnation that permeated the socialist space. Man-made materials that had once exemplified the promise of abundance for all came to exemplify the regime's hubristic attempts to dominate nature. [Egalitarianism](#) became discredited in part because it had become conflated in everyday practice with standardisation and uniformity. Likewise, rational and efficient became synonymous with cheap and austere. People sensed that the contempt for nature reflected in the communist domestic aesthetic presaged some deeper malaise. According to Fehérváry, the cataclysm of Chernobyl is affectively anticipated in this domestic parable (Fehérváry 2012: 627).

Dace Dzenovska's ethnography (2018) of postsocialist Latvia lights up the dark underside of what neoliberal acceptance might mean for former socialist populations. The country at the edge of the European Union remained haunted by the afterlife of the Soviet Union's internal borders and nationalities policies, yet it reluctantly ingested public tolerance and liberal political [values](#). Learning to navigate the paradox of Europeaness imposes the imperative to profess and institutionalise the values of inclusion and openness while at the same time practicing—and also institutionalising—exclusion and closure. Having become a European Union frontier state, Latvia is required to reorient its border vision from protecting its national territory to protecting all of Europe. This responsibility includes being concerned not only with border control and geopolitics, but also with migration control, which had barely registered on Latvian public and political agendas prior to Europeanisation. Latvia's history as a former Soviet state with a sizeable and contested [ethnic](#) Russian population, migrants from Soviet times, easily outranks in popular affective and institutional priority the imperative to police the posthistorical perimeter of the longed-for European homeland. Latvians experienced the condition of being 'not quite European'. In order to meet the normative attitudinal standards that will permit them to take their place among the liberal subjects of the European project, Latvians need to purge their [racist](#), sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic inclinations, supported and scrutinised by 'tolerance' [workers](#), employed by the state.

So far, so liberal. Yet the migration officials and border guards who are Dzenovska's interlocutors are better at learning the repressive elements of Europe's migration regime; that is, securing the border, and keeping 'barbarians' (Dzenovska 2018: 206) at the gate, rather than embracing the redemptive elements like tolerance and compassion. History hasn't ended in Latvia. Caught between its Soviet past and its European future, the tension between openness and closure is not to be simply mapped onto a discursive juxtaposition between liberalism and illiberalism and, subsequently, spatially onto Western and Eastern Europe. Latvians experience a deferred, disappointed, and elusive present: aspiring to be Europeans, longing to shed their hated socialist past, as they see it, as vassals of their gigantic next door neighbour to the East, yet haunted by postsocialist instincts and reflexes.

Alexia Bloch's account (2017) of the entrepreneurial, familial, and intimate lives of migrant women who navigate the physical, emotional, and [financial](#) routes running from the former Soviet borderlands of Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine and Southern Russia into Turkey, illustrates the formation of a powerfully

gendered but specifically postsocialist prototype of neoliberal subjecthood. These women, often the primary breadwinners of their extended families, support remittance economic [relations](#) with their home communities, often leaving children to be [cared](#) for by older family members in 'other mother' arrangements, reminiscent of similar economic migrant women in Third World settings. Their relations with husbands at [home](#) are often characterised by role-reversal, with women in the active, dominant role, with [dependent](#) stay-at-home husbands whose absence of status and sometimes of any significant role provides a ghostly echo of the marginalised men, washed up on the shores of the socialist ideal in the time of *khaos*, described by Parsons and others. Bloch analyses practices and postures that complicate liberal narratives that assume a trajectory from an 'oppressive' state socialism to the 'opportunities' offered by global capitalism. Socialist paradigms and forms of governance are not immediately or evenly displaced, and people who lived under state socialism continue to reflect on a sense of a derailed socialist modernity. Some of Bloch's older interlocutors lament being inserted into a global service economy where ideals of socialist [labour](#) have no meaning, and they no longer have any social protections in the form of pensions, overtime, sick leave, or mechanisms for gender equity. Often, whilst successful, even thriving, businesswomen, they harbour a residual shame at their involvement in tainted 'bourgeois' buying and selling, frowned upon in socialist morality. One such troubled respondent confessed that to be a trader was to be a fallen socialist of sorts (Bloch 2017: 71). In contrast, some younger women consider their work and life in Turkey as exciting, urbane, and an escape from the confining socialist structures and gender ideals of the past. This latter group exemplify ideals of glamour, romance, and sexuality made available through the freedom offered by mobility. This freedom affords new structures of feeling, including new forms of romance, courtship, and 'companionate' marriage. These structures include so-called 'modern' forms of intimacy, including concubinage and the online sex industry. These women speak of having more power from the position of an illicit relationship than they would in a 'real marriage'. Bloch ruefully reflects back on the prevalence in the early postsocialist years of women turning to international marriage services to look for husbands because they had struggled in their home communities of Belarus and Russia to find husbands who would be financially stable, sober, and not abusive, but also to find husbands who would provide for them both materially *and* emotionally. The practices and new structures of feeling observed by Bloch run counter to the commonly held view of the traffic of women as victims across borders. They confound the growing concern for 'security' at borders and afford more nuanced understandings of the links between global capitalism and women's (and men's) migration.

Conclusion

Postsocialism did not simply follow on from socialism, and socialism did not simply go away. Key postsocialist works indicate that postsocialist forms of being were established well before socialism's political demise. Similarly, some of socialism's material forms and social norms continued and have proved to have a [resilient](#) afterlife. The span of recent postsocialist anthropological scholarship described above

does not indicate a concept in decline or even in retreat as yet. To shoehorn postsocialism into the narrow rubric of area studies would test the category's limits on simple geographic grounds alone. The [ethnographic](#) fields detailed here have been located in Europe, but might easily have included Central Asia (Pelkmans 2017, Reeves 2014) or Mongolia (Empson 2011, Pedersen 2011). In any event, notwithstanding their physical locus, all of these sites are traversed by global forces, for example, the European Union funding that stipulates Latvian 'tolerance'; the self-improvement therapies and wellbeing philosophy imported from the US to the adolescent psychology clinics of St. Petersburg; the global assemblages of Dunn's Polish baby food standards; Buchanan's public fiscal theory that restructures Belaya Kalitva's social infrastructure; Bloch's young women's ideals of 'plastic sexuality without complexes'. It is clear that diverse theoretical concerns, gathered under the postsocialist moniker, such as [ontology](#), knowledge formation, personhood, materiality, sovereignty, borders, migration, gender, globalism and modernity, are not exclusive to former socialist societies. Connections, not simply legitimising but also enriching, could and should be made to other organising 'post-' categories in anthropology. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (2009) have proposed the conflation of postsocialism with [postcolonial](#) studies to create a single overarching category: the post-Cold War (see also Kwon 2010). They suggest that just as postcoloniality has become a critical perspective on the colonial present, so postsocialism could become a similarly critical standpoint on the continuing social and spatial effects of Cold War power and knowledge (such as in the remaking of markets, property rights, [democratic](#) institutions, workplaces, consumption, families, gender/sexual [relations](#), or communities).

Yet if there is one defining comparative ethnographic feature of postsocialism that this entry has highlighted, it is the looping temporality of the postsocialist subject. If the postcolonial/Third World societies were once placed in the evolutionary chronotopes of backwardness, in stereotyped stages of society and the teleologies of modernisation theory which in turn interpolated postcolonial subjects as without [history](#) and without [agency](#) (Chakrabarty 2000), then it can be argued that the postsocialist subject demonstrates something different but parallel vis-a-vis the times of modernity. When Yurchak describes the disaffected youth of Leningrad as 'being vnye' (outside-inside) he is showing them to be postsocialist subjects, not late-socialist subjects. They are postsocialist but live in the 1970s and 1980s (i.e., in positivist political science terms, they lived in 'developed socialism'). They were already being postsocialist but still during 'socialism'. How is that possible? It isn't, if you understand postsocialism and socialism as related to each other as 'after' relates to 'before'. The nested temporality of postsocialism within socialism, which hatched when the socialist state eventually withered away, exemplifies concretely how people orient towards and, over decades if not centuries, silently prepare the groundwork for futures beyond immediate conceptual comprehension. Familiarity with this phenomenon has left scholars of postsocialism well placed to spot analogies between these events and the possible signs of the emergence of postliberal societies and subjectivities (see Boyer & Yurchak 2010, Dzenovska & Kurtović 2018)

What was unique about socialist societies was that they were founded upon ideology that took human nature and anthropology itself as a problem. That reflexive ideology proposed an answer to this problem, which percolated down through Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin from Hegel, to insist that human behaviour and subjectivity were and are plastic and mutable, albeit framed within a historical dialectic. Beyond socialism's demise, real or simply alleged, the tension created by that dialectic persists within the current [neoliberal](#) world order. Notwithstanding its questionable adequacy as an organising trope, innovative anthropology focussed upon lives led under the shrinking shadow of socialist organisation, ideology, and experience, and societies still haunted by communism's ghosts, continues to be written under the name of postsocialism.

References

- Bacon, E. & M. Sandle 2002. *Brezhnev reconsidered*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benjamin, W. 2003. On the concept of history. In *Walter Benjamin: selected writings vol.4, 1938-1940* (eds) H. Eiland & M.W. Jennings, 389-400. Cambridge, Mass.: Belnap Press.
- Bernstein, A. 2019. *The future of immortality: remaking life and death in contemporary Russia*. Princeton: University Press.
- Bloch, A. 2017. *Sex, love, and migration: postsocialism, modernity, and intimacy from Istanbul to the Arctic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Boyer, D. & A. Yurchak 2010. American stio: or, what late-socialist aesthetics of parody reveal about contemporary political culture in the West. *Cultural Anthropology* **25**(2), 179-221.
- Brown, K. 2013. *Plutopia: nuclear families, atomic cities and the great Soviet and American plutonium disasters*. Oxford: University Press.
- Buck-Morss, S. 2000. *Dreamworld and catastrophe: the passing of mass utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Caldwell, M. 2004. *Not by bread alone: social support in the new Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton: University Press.
- Chari, S. & K. Verdery 2009. Thinking between the posts: postcolonialism, and ethnography after the Cold War. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* **51**(1), 6-34.

- Clark, K. 2011. *Moscow, the fourth Rome: Stalinism, cosmopolitanism and the evolution of Soviet culture 1931-1941*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Collier, S.J. 2011. *Post Soviet social: neoliberalism, social modernity, biopolitics*. Princeton: University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1994. *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge.
- Dunlop, J. 1993. *The rise of Russia and the fall of the Soviet empire*. Princeton: University Press.
- Dunn, E.C. 2004. *Privatizing Poland: baby food, big business, and the remaking of labor*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Dzenovska, D. 2018. *School of Europeaness: tolerance and other lessons in political liberalism in Latvia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- & L. Kurtović 2018. Lessons for liberalism from the 'illiberal East'. *Fieldsites. Cultural Anthropology* online (available on-line: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/lessons-for-liberalism-from-the-illiberal-east>). Accessed November 2020.
- Fabian, J. 1984. *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fehérvári, K. 2012. From socialist modern to supernatural organicism: cosmological transformations through home décor. *Cultural Anthropology* 27(4), 615-40.
- 2013. *Politics in color and concrete: socialist materialities and the middle class in Hungary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Feinberg, M. 2017. *Curtain of lies: the battle over truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzpatrick, S. (ed.) 2000. *Stalinism: new directions*. London: Routledge.
- Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Macmillan.
- Ghodsee, K. 2018. *Second world second sex: socialist women's activism and global solidarity during the Cold War*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Glaeser A. 2011. *Political epistemics: the secret police, the opposition, and the end of East German socialism*. Chicago: University Press.
- Groys, B. 2009. *The communist postscript*. London: Verso.

- Halfin, I. 2007. *Intimate enemies: demonizing the Bolshevik opposition*. Pittsburgh: University Press.
- Hann, C.M. (ed.) 2002. *Postsocialism: ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1977. *Phenomenology of spirit* (trans. A.W. Miller). Oxford: University Press.
- Hellbeck, J. 2006. *Revolution on my mind: writing a diary under Stalin*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hemingway, E. 1954. *The sun also rises*. New York: Scribner.
- Hemment, J. 2015. *Youth politics in Putin's Russia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Höjdestrand, T. 2009. *Needed by nobody: homelessness and humanness in postsocialist Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Humphrey, C. 1983. *Karl Marx collective: economy, society and religion in a Siberian collective farm*. Cambridge: University Press.
- 2002. *The unmaking of Soviet life: everyday economies after socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kharkhordin O. 1999. *The collective and the individual in Russia: a study of practices*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kotkin, S. 1995. *Magnetic mountain: Stalinism as a civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kwon, H. 2010. *The other Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ledeneva, A. 2006. *How Russia really works: the informal practices that shaped post-Soviet politics and business*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lemon, A. 2018. *Technologies for intuition: Cold War circles and telepathic rays*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Lindquist, G. 2005. *Conjuring hope: healing and magic in contemporary Russia*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Luehrmann, S. 2011. *Secularism Soviet style: teaching atheism and religion in a Volga republic*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Martin, D. 2008. Palimpsest: reconnecting with the past in post-unification Germany. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 27(3), 36-57.
- Marx, K. 1978. Preface to a contribution to a critique of political economy. In *The Marx-Engels reader*

(second edition) (ed.) R. Tucker, 3-6. London: W.W. Norton.

Matza, T. 2018. *Shock therapy: psychology, precarity and well-being in postsocialist Russia*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Morris, J. 2016. *Everyday post-socialism: working-class communities in the Russian margins*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Orwell, G. 1951. *Animal farm*. London: Penguin.

Oushakine, S.A. 2009. *The patriotism of despair: nation, war and loss in Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Parsons, M. 2014. *Dying unneeded: the cultural context of the Russia mortality crisis*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Pedersen, M.A. 2011. *Not quite shamans: spirit worlds and political lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Pelkmans, M. 2017. *Fragile convictions: changing ideological landscapes in urban Kyrgyzstan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Pesmen, D. 2000. *Russia and soul: an exploration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Petryna, A. 2013. *Life exposed: biological citizens after Chernobyl*. Princeton: University Press.

Pomerantsev, P. 2014. *Nothing is true and everything is possible: the surreal heart of the new Russia*. London: Faber.

Reeves, M. 2014. *Border work: spatial lives of the state in rural Central Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Rodgers, D. 2009. *The old faith and the Russian land*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Sachs, J. 1990. 'What is to be done?' (13 January), *The Economist* (available on-line: <https://www.economist.com/europe/1990/01/13/what-is-to-be-done>).

Shevchenko, O. 2009. *Crisis and the everyday in postsocialist Moscow*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Slezkine, Y. 2000. The USSR as a communal apartment, or how the Soviet state promoted ethnic particularism. In *Stalinism: new directions* (ed.) S. Fitzpatrick, 313-47. London: Routledge.

Ssorin-Chaikov, N. 2006. On heterochrony: birthday gifts to Stalin, 1949. *Journal of the Royal*

Anthropological Institute **12**(2), 355-75.

——— 2017. *Two Lenins: a brief anthropology of time*. Chicago: Hau Books, University of Chicago Press.

Verdery, K. 1991. *National ideology under socialism: identity and cultural politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

——— 2003. *The vanishing hectare: property and value in postsocialist Transylvania*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Wanner, C. 2007. *Communities of the converted: Ukrainians and global evangelism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Yurchak, A. 2006. *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation*. Princeton: University Press.

Zigon, J. 2010. *HIV is God's blessing: rehabilitating morality in neoliberal Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Zinoviev, A. 1986. *Homo Sovieticus*. London: Paladin.

Zubok, V. 2009. *Zhivago's children: the last Russian intelligentsia*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Note on contributor

Dominic Martin is an anthropologist of Russia and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Oxford. His work concerns the relationship between postsocialist life and the transformations of economy, society, and sovereignty that followed the end of the Cold War in Russia's Asia-Pacific borderlands.

Dominic Martin, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography 51/53 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE
Dominic.martin@compas.ox.ac.uk