

## **Reframing post/decolonial knowledge production over the epistemic East / West divide - critical perspectives from the Global East**

### **Labor Migration / Labor Kritische Europäisierungsforschung**

#### **Abstract**

**22.01.2021, 10:00 - 13:00 on Zoom**

In the current pandemic condition, we witness rapid reconfigurations as well as enduring and deepening inequalities with regard to the interrelations of human bodies, migration and marginalization. A glaring example of this came to the fore in German media discussions of exempting Eastern European workers from Corona travel restrictions in order to ensure cheap seasonal labor in the agricultural sector. Here as elsewhere, it became obvious that divisions between East and West still matter and continue to figure in various ways throughout Europe.

In this session, we will explore an emerging field of critical inquiry into these East-West divisions through a focus on decolonial perspectives on knowledge production from areas that are differently called post-socialist, post-soviet or the Global East. Bringing together contributions of three scholars and activists whose academic work unfolds from within those areas, we hope to approach the inequalities between the West and the East in our academic settings and beyond. We are interested in how Eastern Europe emerges as an epistemic space entangled in structural inequalities and aim to follow the relational knots of power and knowledge at work in various instantiations of East-West divisions.

#### **Speakers:**

**Dr Alexandra Urdea** is currently working in the Behavioural Science Team for the Dept for Work and Pension of the UK government. Alex has completed a PhD in anthropology at Goldsmiths. This research examined how folk objects are mobilized in national ideologies, transmissions of personal and family memory, museological discourses, and artistic acts. Alex's postdoctoral research at the University of Sussex focused on Romanian migration in London which will be the focus of today's short input on the relations between mobilities, labour and ethnic and racial identities

**Victoria Kravtsova**, MA in International Relations: "Between the posts, into the void: making sense of feminism and decolonialization in Bishkek and Almaty", Vica has been co-organizing the Feminist Translocalities / Feminist Utopias platform <https://feminisms.co/en>. She holds a permanent position as project manager at Dekrabisten e.V. in Berlin and is currently working on her PhD application. Her main topics of research and activism are feminism and decolonization in the post-Soviet space.

**Eszter Kováts**, MA: "Symptomatic blind spots - Inequalities between Eastern and Western Europe in German academia". Eszter Kováts holds a BA in Sociology, an MA in French and German Studies and in Political Science. She is a PhD student in Political Science at ELTE University, Budapest. Until recently, she was a guest researcher at the Humboldt University in Berlin. She was working in the Hungarian Office of the German political foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) from 2009 till end of 2019. From 2012 till 2019 she was responsible for the Foundation's gender program for East-Central Europe.

If you are interested to read introductory literature before our session, you might have a look into the following two readings or the Feminist Utopias online platform.

Kojanić, O. (2020). Theory from the Peripheries: What Can the Anthropology of Postsocialism Offer to European Anthropology?. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 29(2), 49-66. Access here: <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/ajec/29/2/ajec290204.xml>

Tlostanova, Madina (2015): Can the post-Soviet think? On coloniality of knowledge, external imperial and double colonial difference. In: *Intersections* 1 (2). Access here: <https://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/article/view/38>

Feminist Utopias platform: <https://feminisms.co/en>

## SESSION INTRODUCTION

*Dr. Magdalena Buchczyk:*

In our last seminar, we discussed the questions of whiteness that play a fundamental role in the ways in which the current global pandemic is produced and experienced. This session builds upon some of the questions that started to emerge. Drawing on some of the conversations about the different shades of whiteness, we would like to move our discussion to the conceptual, political and social grey zone or blind spot in Europe - Eastern Europe, or as we put it in the title, the Global East.

We chose this term because we are aware that the terms used to refer to the region – post-soviet, post-socialist, Eastern Europe, Eastern Central Europe, Southeastern Europe etc. – are already part of the debate and positionality. “Global East” is our pragmatic shorthand referring to this complexity.

In our title, we also use the term “epistemic East / West divide”, and in the abstract we say “we are interested in how Eastern Europe emerges as an epistemic space entangled in structural inequalities and aim to follow the relational knots of power and knowledge at work in various instantiations of East-West divisions.”

When referring to the region as a “grey zone” or “blind spot”, this also refers to conceptual positionality, mostly from a Western perspective without regional expertise. Our social sciences colleagues from the region of course don’t live and operate in a grey zone but in the realities of their non-western, European, Eurasian... societies, communicating with their Western/metropolitan colleagues (= “us”) from differently located positions in the geopolitics of knowledge production and geopolitics of translation, with means different conceptual approaches, even when referring to the same postcolonial literature canon. “Epistemic East-West-divide”, in many cases, refers to a Western lack of knowledge about the region’s societies as well as the scholarship and theory coming from the region, addressing these structural inequalities.

In the current pandemic condition, we witness rapid reconfigurations as well as enduring and deepening inequalities with regard to the interrelations of human bodies, migration and marginalization. A glaring example of this came to the fore in German media discussions of exempting Eastern European workers from Corona travel restrictions in order to ensure cheap seasonal labor in the agricultural sector. Scholars from the region were among the first ones addressing this: For example, as early as April, a Romanian journalist and academic asked “Are

western Europe's food supplies worth more than east European workers' health"? The article argued that the shipping of Eastern European bodies to West European fields, factories and care homes demonstrates an inherent underlying inequality. The stampede of East European workers boarding planes and temporarily occupying cluttered quarters, working in dire conditions without social distancing contrasted with the ideas of setting standards of public health for the mutual care of Europeans. The virus outbreaks in the meat factories of Germany showed that the social contract of Europe might apply only partially, in some spaces to selected people. This poses wider questions about the underlying values of labour supply, cross-border cooperation and certain fantasies of the EU as a protected labour regime or area of fundamental rights. Dr Anna Safuta called the pandemic a magnifying glass for the precariousness of migrant workers, demonstrating vividly the exploitative nature of such relations.

At the same time as we watched the images of crammed buses heading to German fields, news were flooded by images of protests taking the "East" by storm - Bulgarians coming out into the streets to protest corruption, Poles opposing the draconian abortion ban that came to force conveniently in the midst of the pandemic and Belarussian women calling for the resignation of the authoritarian president after so-called elections in which Lukashenko, unsurprisingly, scored yet another landslide win.

If COVID-19 is a magnifying glass of underlying tensions, what the pandemic highlights is that the divisions between the East and West still matter and continue to figure in various ways throughout Europe. Today, we would like to initiate a discussion about this challenge on the ground in Europe and how we as researchers can respond to and reflect on the social reality, the underlying inequalities, hierarchies and tensions both in terms of social life such as labour but also knowledge production. Through our three speakers, we also want to point to some of the directions in which the notion of research on Eastern Europe or from Eastern Europe might be heading. We will start with a very short outline of research on Eastern Europe, an introduction that will hopefully supplement the reading that you were sent by Ronda.

### **Short introductory review into academic research so far...**

To introduce the session, we briefly trace outline some of the key research themes linked to the question of how Eastern Europe, Global East or the post-socialist/post-Soviet space has been produced in academic discourse. The summary is as a whistle stop tour of some of the key post-war approaches rather than an exhaustive literature review.

The study of the region has been developed as a dynamic research area after the Second World War. Russian and Eastern European studies have been among the earliest and most important currents in area studies scholarship, partly because of the evident geopolitical importance of these territories during the Cold War, partly because of their relative accessibility as an extension of European studies (for a review of post-war anthropology see Halpern and Kideckel 1983).

As Buchowski (2006) argued,

*The Iron Curtain set a clear-cut division into "us" and "them" which was reduced, in fact, to geography. The two systems' border was inscribed in the mental map in which continuous space was transformed into discontinuous places inhabited by two distinctive tribes: the civilized "us" and the exotic, often "uncivilized" Others"*

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, anthropology saw the emergence of post-socialist studies. This umbrella term included various ethnographies of transition that captured the ruptures and continuities in the notions of gender and kinship, commemoration processes, property transformation, labour and moral economy, consumption or urban change, among others (e.g. Pine 2003, Fehérváry, K. 2002, Hann 2002, Humphrey 1998, Todorova & Gille 2010, Verdery 1996).

At the same time, research focused on rethinking the East as a discursive construction and a semi-peripheral space embedded in structural dependency with the West (e.g. Boatcă 2006, Gowan 1996). The region was examined as a site of interventions in political economy and a space of cultural imaginaries. Studies concerned the region as a site of historical representation, arguing that Eastern Europe was historically invented as both a dreamland and an enemy, linked to ideas of barbarism and enchantment (Thum 2006, Wippermann 2011, Wolff 1994). For example, in Germany the region was linked to ideas of *Drang nach Osten*, a long lasting political imaginary of colonial settlement:

*East served as an invented tradition of the German national movement and reified a German-Slavic conflict since the Middle Ages. It had gained new prominence during Nazi rule when the Lebensraum ideology advocated the renewed colonization of Poland and the Soviet Union. (Feindt 2017: 555)*

Todorova (2009) looked at Southeastern Europe as a site of Orientalist imaginaries. Her analysis of the idea of the Balkans demonstrated how the geographical area constituted a spatial and temporal category similar to that of the Orient, offering a fantasy escape to the past (2009: 14).

In the 2010s, the debate on the usefulness of the concept of post-socialism has been dominating the field. In 2012, Červinková wrote that 'postsocialism is an orientalizing concept through which western anthropologists constructed postcommunist Europe' (Červinková 2012: 159). She argued that "the East" became a guinea pig for evaluating Western theories, with "peripheries" providing the source of raw material or data for the theorising in the "centre". Müller (2020) has recently said "goodbye" to post-socialism, arguing that it is a vanishing object fetishising rupture rather than continuity and falling into a territorial trap. In his view, the conceptual framework of post-socialism needs to be understood in orientalising knowledge production.

Increasingly, there has been a move to consider the East as a source of new theorising to invert knowledge hierarchies. Kojanić's (2020) argued that we should not only examine the discursive construction, or conditions of peripheralisation of Eastern Europe but also adopt a 'peripheral vision'. These projects of "critical Europeanisation" and "critical area studies" argue for new optics and research that de-centres and de-centres across scales (e.g. Adam et al. 2018, Beasley-Murray et al, Dale, Miklóssy & Segert 2017, Zysiak and Marzec 2020).

*Soph B. Petzelberger:*

Queer and feminist researchers and activists in Eastern Europe and Central Asia develop unique perspectives on decoloniality, being shaped by a life between the posts: post-colonial, post-socialist, post-empire (Tlostanova 2015). Moreover, their work is often entangled in neo-colonial "unhealthy" relationships and financial dependencies with the West and thereby, to quote a queer activist featured on the *Feminist Translocalities* platform, "stuck between the past and the present" (Kambekova 2020). At the same time, feminist decolonial activists from the

region often find themselves on the intersections of re-claiming their pre-colonial and pre-Soviet heritages, while being confronted with nationalistic forces aiming to “re-traditionalize” patriarchal gender relations, portraying queer and feminist struggles as yet another era of “forceful emancipation”, this time carried out by Western NGOs (Cleuziou & Direnberger 2016: 196; Gradskova 2019: 67).

*Dr. Magdalena Buchczyk*

Research projects increasingly consider the entanglements between non-European and East European post-colonialities and decolonial projects (Dzenovska 2013). These studies are driven by questions of regional entanglements in colonial relations (e.g. Valerio 2019 showing how as the 19th century German state aimed to subjugate Polish “wild east” territories, Polish intellectuals participated in colonial fantasies and the German imperial project in Africa). This work complicates Eastern Europe’s positionality through asking questions about how subjects and communities in Eastern Europe are implicated in ongoing coloniality (Lehrer 2021). Migration research points to “the continuous (post)colonial and (post)imperial entanglements between Europe and non-Europe that establish cultural hierarchies, which in turn are intrinsic to the process of Europeanization” (Lewicki 2020). For instance, research on EU migration highlighted how East European mobilities are part of subtle and class-based processes of racialisation. Migration scholars (e.g. Botterill & Burrell 2019, Moore 2019, Loftsdóttir 2017, Paraschivescu 2017) showed that these differentiated experiences of whiteness and Europeanness stem from wider (post)colonial and (post)imperial legacies and constellations (Parvulescu 2015, Lewicki 2020).

Finally, recent studies brought about new questions about whether Eastern, post-socialist Europe or ‘the Global East’ can be regarded as a region or a semi-periphery with any common characteristics at all e.g. see recent debate on Eurasia (Hann 2016 and responses). The questions arise not only about ways of territorial bundling or social lumping but also about developing equitable knowledge relations and novel approaches e.g. Eastern Europe as a method (Parvulescu 2020). These studies point to the potential of other conversations and theoretical possibilities of thinking with and across South-North and East-West divides e.g. Boatcă 2020 and various emerging research initiatives such as POSOCOMES group in Memory Studies Association.

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