Perspectives

Detours from Utopia on the Silk Road: Ethical Dilemmas of Neoliberal Triumphalism[1]

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Neoliberalism — that family of ideas, policies, institutions, and practices explicitly promoting what is called "developed capitalism," along with its assumed sociopolitical concomitants such as civil liberties and democratic institutions — has been the governing framework for Western assistance to the "developing" world since the 1980s. Since the dissolution of the Soviet bloc between 1989 and 1991, neoliberal policies have been deployed in Central Eurasia with a particular vigor, indeed triumphalism. The scholarly literature about contemporary Central Eurasia does not question this neoliberal framework or its suitability for Central Eurasian societies. Rather, it takes for granted the neoliberal goals of economic and political reform as neoliberalism defines them. All phenomena in the region today, it seems, are understood according to the grand narrative of the "transition" to free markets or representative democracy, while all current problems are ascribed simply to the transition's incompleteness. The purpose of this Perspectives article is to provide evidence urging us to think differently about neoliberalism and how it applies to Central Eurasia today. Using a series of suggestive cases in point, I will argue for the importance of looking at what actually happens on the ground, of recognizing how people fashion new economic and social arrangements in practice, and of taking seriously the ethical dimensions of the region's dramatic transformations. In conclusion, I synthesize these insights into a critical evaluation of neoliberalism in Central Eurasia.

The Big Importance of the Small Scale

Scholars of contemporary Central Eurasia fail to question the nature and applicability of neoliberalism to the region in part because they tend to confine their analyses to large-scale, top-level issues of national economies and political elites. Such analyses tend to miss the complexities of how those issues actually play out on the scale of communities and individuals. When they do consider the small scale, they often assume it to be a straightforward instantiation of the macrotrends. There is little theorization about unintended consequences and newly emergent phenomena that arise from the play of forces at local levels, where political and cultural contestation can occur over ways of interpreting economic situations and imagining alternative possibilities (Burawoy and Verdery 1999a). This is a significant gap in our knowledge of the region, because human actors come up with the most innovative and unexpected practices for coping under conditions of dramatic, disruptive state transformation (see Greenhouse 2002). Considering the everyday lifeworlds of people and communities is important not only for knowing how people are actually being affected by the tremendous structural changes in Central Eurasia today. Analyses of the "spatial and temporal rhythms of the routines of daily life" (Burawoy 1999: 301) also provide, moreover, unique leverage on grasping the big picture itself. Attending to the complexities and ambiguities on the ground may reveal the non-deterministic, creative aspects of everyday practice that can influence macro outcomes (Burawoy and Verdery 1999a: 7). The actual processes of how new institutions or values like citizen initiative or entrepreneurship might take root (or fail to do so) take place at the level of mundane life (1999a: 6). Sensitivity to the small scale could greatly benefit the study of Central Eurasia at any scale and from any disciplinary perspective, because it can reveal the inaccuracies and qualifications of the currently dominant grand narratives of the region's marketization or democratization.

[1] My grateful acknowledgement goes to Robert Cutler for his eloquent and insightful editing of this article.

Awareness of these potential complexities entails a certain caution in employing notions such as "the market," "the state," "civil society," etc. While these concepts certainly have their proper uses, we must realize that the phenomena on the ground that they are asserted to describe are radically inchoate, fragmented, contested, and inflected by local meaning (Ries 2002). Describing the Russian economy during the 1990s, for example, Caroline Humphrey (2002d: xx) writes,

> The market is there, and yet somehow it does not operate as theory predicts, and the same is true of "electoral democracy" and other such categories developed to explain Euro-American actualities. Yet it would be a mistake to take the line that the standard concepts are fine in the abstract but they do not work in Russia, having simply run foul of something called "Russian culture."

Indeed, such a line of argument treats specific cultures as obstacles to processes that are assumed to be universal in applicability. As famously expressed in Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis (Huntington 1996), culture is seen as a pre-given independent variable, considered important in determining economic and political outcomes only in non-Western contexts. However, institutional practices such as market relations or civic participation are as embedded in and as dependent on cultural frameworks in the West as they are anywhere in the world, as originally noted by Weber in his classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1958 [1920]). Western analysts tend to miss this because they tend to be blind to their own cultural assumptions. Given the power relations between "the West" and "the rest," and given their own place in the reproduction of those power relations, little compels them to question this blindness. We need to acknowledge that culture is an integral aspect of any economic or political order rather than an entity standing in opposition to them. Instead of scapegoating culture in order to preserve the integrity of grand theories, we should allow intellectual integrity to compel us to acknowledge that human reality is far too complex to be fully captured by any general scheme of explanation. This does not mean abandoning the search for systematic trends and underlying causes, but only tempering and qualifying them with the "messiness" one almost invariably finds on the ground (Mertz 2002). When we abandon the compulsion of parsimony at all costs, "untidy" details cease to sully the big picture and instead enhance it.

To illustrate how attention to the small scale illuminates the large, let us take the issue of civil society, which is of particular importance to Central Eurasia today. Civil society — today defined as that realm of public life held to be separate from the state and the market — is asserted to be what "totalitarianism" negated and what postsocialist liberalizations are supposed to develop along with the creation of the new states and markets (however, see Hann 2002a: 9 for a critical appraisal). Citizen-initiated activity manifesting in a robust layer of independent organizations would, the theory goes, help create the conditions for democratization of political institutions and marketization of economies. "In strengthening grassroots citizen organizations, such programs strengthen principles of citizen participation and activism, of government accountability to citizen concerns, and of civil rights — including the basic right of citizens to organize in order to press for more rights" (Ruffin 1999: 4). The larger goal is to "affect a nation's political culture, help mitigate authoritarian, xenophobic, or insular attitudes ... and diminish the constituencies of extremist leaders and movements" (1999: 5).

Individuals' responses to structural constraints and opportunities on the ground, however, can have unintended consequences that subvert those goals. For example, because international donors often cannot locate truly self-initiated and self-run organizations in post-Soviet Central Asia, they recruit promising individuals (often Soviet-era elites) to start them. These resulting so-called DONGOs (donor organized NGOs) are in reality subservient to donor agendas. "[They] do not have the same grassroots, civic character as the classical NGO. Their activities necessarily express goals and values of those in control of the budgets they depend upon" (Ruffin 1999: 12). When Ruth Mandel undertook a study of locally hired employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Kazakhstan from 1994-2000 (Mandel 2002), she found that those whom the NGOs hired locally learned quickly that their success depended on the extent to which they could master the language of "NGO-speak" and "parse the world," according to the rubrics predefined by USAID (pigeonholing complex problems as simply a "women's issue" or a "democratic transition issue").

In consequence, "rather than a *sui generis* class of local development workers, [these individuals] represent the local stratum of the larger class of international development professionals" (Mandel 2002: 287). Moreover, these people's very socialization into Western professional practices produces their failure to become influential models for the rest of Kazakhstani society. They instead become increasingly alienated from it, continue in careers connected with the international community, and may emigrate (sometimes by marrying Western aid workers). A talented young Kazakh employee of an USAID office that Mandel interviewed went on to work for the local Coca-Cola office. She turned down a prestigious job with President Nazarbayev's transition team in the new capital of Astana not only because the pay was half of Coke's, but also because, "I'm not sure I would want to work in that type of organization [i.e., the Kazakhstani state] — I wouldn't have the freedom I have in my job now" (2002: 288). Other interviewees, who had experienced USAID training in modern professional practice, also expressed an unwillingness to return to local work environments because of their strict hierarchy, clientelism, and stifling of individual initiative. And so, the personal disincentives for these new internationalized elites to work within their societies militate against the possibility of these foreign-directed NGOs influencing the general culture of the recipient country.

Yet another factor visible on the small scale can subvert the goals of those who promote the development of civil society in Central Eurasia: attempts to encourage "grassroots" initiative may end up reinforcing such illiberal institutions as patriarchy and clientelism. For example, post-Soviet Uzbekistan has embarked on a campaign for "national renewal" by farming out social welfare functions to *mahalla* committees — neighborhood-based councils supposedly representing "native" community organization (even though they had been co-opted and reconstituted by Soviet authority) (Jalilov 1995). As a result, women are being subjected to the paternalism and favoritism of local male elders, with attendant threats to their welfare (Kamp 2003). Kamp's insights into such dynamics are possible only because she has spent much time living in *mahallas* and interviewing women extensively.

Research focused on the small scale is valuable even when studying global issues. This is so because globally circulating ideas and values intersect with local needs and sensibilities in diverse ways *through small, concrete encounters* in the everyday lives of those born and living in the region. For example, regular direct air connections to cities such as Dubai, Mecca, Istanbul, Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Beijing promote a bustling flow of people, goods, and money that results in the presence of an explosive variety of merchandise available in the newly constructed stalls, kiosks, and bazaars. This has led to the development of classes of consumer tastes and preferences that characteristically accompany identity formation in capitalist systems. Not only do Central Eurasian male youth who watch foreign movies starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jackie Chan receive ideas about being masculine and modern: such media are usually their only window onto the world. An entire generation is forming its attitudes towards the U.S., the West, and the "outside" world under the influence — sometimes the exclusive influence — of how these are depicted by Hollywood, Hong Kong, and other centers of media concentration in the developed and developing worlds.

Their attitudes are likewise formed by the implicit lifestyle messages carried by such commodities as Coca-Cola, Kodak, or the infamously low-quality Chinese products that flood the region's bazaars. Meanwhile, Central Eurasian Muslims are being trained as clerics and returning from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey; Islamic books printed in the Middle East, Kazan, or Moscow find their way onto vendor tables outside mosques refurbished with Saudi money. How Islam is presented and taught through these channels affects how these Muslims understand morality, community, the state, and the world. Those basic understandings influence, in turn, their attitudinal predispositions concerning domestic policies, interethnic relations, and foreign affairs. It is impossible to construct an accurate understanding of how globally circulating ideas and practices are worked into the life of Central Eurasian societies without a keen awareness of all these specific elements — from material commodities to Islamic knowledge — contribute to the larger picture.

Innovative Responses on the Ground

Small-scale views on the ground reveal the variety and creativity of the responses of people on the ground in Central Asia as they live through the region's seismic economic and political shifts. A focus on the small scale emphasizes *agency*, i.e., the capacity of individuals or collectivities to make choices and act in ways that are not all determined

by circumstances, habits, or "traditions" (Berdahl 2000: 4-5). There is a prevailing assumption inside and outside of academia that "traditional societies" are locked into reproducing unchanging norms and practices unless an external modernity imposes change. Yet numerous anthropological studies worldwide provide irrefutable grounds for radical criticism of such a view. These studies reveal how social agents create alternative avenues of thought and action in the most straitjacketed of circumstances, and even under severe macroeconomic constraint. Under postsocialism, traditions become resources of familiar language and themes that are not deterministic templates for social action but instead form "repertoires of imagination" (Humphrey 2002d: xxi).

> Repeatedly, we find that what may appear as "restorations" of patterns familiar from socialism are something quite different: direct responses to the new market initiatives, produced *by* them, rather than remnants of an older mentality. In other words, we find that what looks familiar has causes that are fairly novel....Action employs symbols and words that...develop using the forms already known, even if with new senses and to new ends (Burawoy and Verdery 1999a: 1-2).

Not only does Central Eurasian reality *not* resemble either a neoliberal economy or a liberal polity, but also it does not even constitute a "socialist regression" from those ideal-types. As such, what is happening on the ground — "life itself" — calls into question the doctrinal assumption that current events represent any kind of a "transition" — even if a misdirected one — to either capitalism or democracy.

Precisely this phenomenon — the reconfiguration of markets and consumption — has been a prolific area of research since the collapse of state-organized distribution. This research reveals a tremendous variety of new arrangements in trade, finance, transport, and selling, as well as the innovation of new meanings entailed in the creation of commodities and in their consumption. These shifts involve newly relevant segments of the population (e.g., women, the elderly, children, certain ethnic groups, academics), indeed in general a much larger proportion of the population than previously, all of whom become directly involved in economic activity that had been entirely foreign to them during the socialist period.[2] This activity has meant increased mobility among those involved in shuttle trade or seasonal work, and the regularization of "social contacts" between groups that did not have such relations before. The unprecedented participation in shifting economies has had a tremendous impact on every aspect of life: family, gender roles, education, religious practice, community cohesion, crime, civic life, intellectual production, interethnic relations, local politics, and state institutions. We are only beginning to study this kind of impact. What happens on these local fronts is far from irrelevant to the course of the large-scale economic and political liberalization that continues to receive, by contrast, an exclusive overemphasis.

Consider, for example, the burgeoning of petty trade. This issue appeared to be on everyone's mind across the postsocialist world, particularly in the early 1990s, at which time almost all new economic activity was channeled into commerce because few opportunities lay in production so soon after the Soviet state imploded. Yet trade liberalization in these economies has not produced the "inevitable" transition to modern capitalist modes of exchange. An important reason for this lies in how the people actually conducting the commerce saw, experienced, and responded to the constraints and opportunities that confronted them.

For example, Caroline Humphrey identifies a complex of circumstances that conditioned how trade developed through the mid-1990s in provincial Russia. She cites an example of a trader who had a license to have her truck on the road, but not to enter the neighboring province (Humphrey 2002c: 76). The erratic regulation regime reflects not only the inexperience of administrations regarding this sector, but also an ambiguous attitude of the state toward free trade, an ambiguity reflecting the general Russian public's dubious regard of such trade. It is difficult for individuals actually living in such a situation to grasp the multi-level totality of all shifting, intersecting, and even mutually contradictory laws governing trade, much less obey them all. As a result, traders widely flout laws concerning finance and distribution, preferring instead networks built upon personal trust.

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[2] Humphrey (2002c: 73) cites an amazing figure: an estimated 49% of the population of Irkutsk was taking part in trade in 1992, although that figure quickly dropped in the ensuing years.

Humphrey distinguishes a number of new categories of traders operating in the Russian provinces during the 1990s, each employing different arrangements and strategies. For example, "resellers" [*perekupshchiki*] were small-time traders dealing with mostly locally-produced goods and working limited routes (often within a city), buying at one place, and reselling at a higher price elsewhere. They were often pensioners or children, with little capital or mobility. "Shuttlers" [*chelnoki*] also did their buying and selling personally but, by contrast to the resellers, they trafficked on longer circuits that crossed regions and international borders. Shuttling therefore required not only knowing friendly (bribable) customs officials and paying off appropriate racketeers for "protection," but also a deeper overall familiarity with authorities, local demand, travel conditions, and risks. "Entrepreneurs" [*predprinimateli*] dealt on a still larger and international scale than shuttlers: they were endowed with more capital, sometimes provided by foreign partners. They had access to fast travel and communication, which they used in order to take quick advantage of evolving local tastes for selected foreign commodities. Those who had the means to do so moved into the potentially more lucrative wholesale arena, which required a still greater level of networking, coordination, and appeasement of authorities. These examples point out how differently positioned individuals exploit opportunities in local demand in different ways, creating distinctive niches for themselves in an emerging commercial sphere. The poverty of a linear socialism-to-capitalism transition scheme fails to capture the diversity of such micro-arrangements, because the emerging commercial sphere is too variegated and its paths of development too multidirectional.

In yet another work, Humphrey (2002b: 17) focuses on post-Soviet practices of bribery. Rather than stipulate *a priori* that bribery is simply and universally "corruption," she considers how bribery is actually practiced in different contexts and its relations to other forms of extralegal activity. While the term "bribe" [*vziatka*] applies strictly only to payments made to public state officials and is, as a practice, morally condemned in everyday Russian life, it exists within a more amorphous arena of unorthodox payments in the newly developing private commercial sphere — payments variously called "additional fees," "tariffs," or "gratuities" (Humphrey 2002b: 127). How such payments are regarded depends on economic status: the disadvantaged abhor them but participate in them out of necessity, while elites practice them as ethically neutral costs of doing business. In some circumstances bribes can even be presented as a moral good. For example, payments to school officials or teachers for placement in the institution have been regarded by the payers as justifiable "in this commercial world," where state support for education has dwindled and teachers remain unpaid for long periods (Humphrey 2002b: 142). An analogous argument has been made concerning the subtle practices of payment for medical services in post-Soviet Russia (Rivkin-Fish 2003). Bribing practices have thus diversified and adapted to the new conditions of state withdrawal and commercialization of public life. It is therefore erroneous to see them as Soviet-era holdovers; rather, they reveal fault-lines in the tectonic shifts of the unstable socio-economic order.

Ethical Dilemmas

The ethical dilemmas of postsocialist transformation are *sine qua non* for understanding economic or political "transition," which as an abstract template projected into the region, necessarily confronts particular and particularistic practices and moral discourses about class, ethnicity, and nationhood. What are these ethical dilemmas? With the contraction of previously taken-for-granted state institutions, people interpret and act upon the severe constraints on their lives not as neutral facts "out there," but according to strongly held notions about how things ought to be. State socialism irrefutably socialized its citizenry into attitudes and practices reflecting a well-defined moral sense about justice in social arrangements on issues ranging from wealth distribution to gender equality. This sense of how society *should* be organized ran deep, regardless of the state's actual practice or failure to implement fully the stated ideals. Since then, "the *everyday moral communities* of socialism have been undermined but not replaced" (Hann 2002a: 10, italics in original). Analytic attention to small-scale complexities on the ground, and to the variety of human creativity acting in the real world, leads to the recognition that the very tangible material crises of postsocialist transformation are frequently apprehended and acted upon as *ethical* dilemmas and choices. Many of those who advocate liberal reforms in Central Eurasia are themselves motivated by an ethical imperative to elevate the material welfare, human rights, and dignity of others. To attempt to do so, however, while ignoring the

distinct ethical sensibilities of those affected by the changes would be disingenuous and paternalistic.

Under socialism people lived with certain expectations about the active role of the state in overseeing society and economy. "Socialism's basic social contract" held that the state would collect the total social product, and in return provide, however imperfectly, lifetime employment, medical care, pensions, and consumer goods, as well as an overall sense of stability and predictability (Verdery 1996: 25). The subsequent disintegration of these "social protections" is widely regarded throughout Central Eurasia as a breach, even a betrayal, of the state's duty. It is bad enough that rampant unemployment and unprecedented inflation have disrupted family livelihoods in general: but specific facts about the new economic order have provoked moral indignation. The variation of prices across different stores or seasons, for example, leads Central Eurasians to see much of the new economic activity as criminal. The above discussion about petty trade illustrates the point.

Harsh economic realities can load the identities ascribed to "others" with weighted moral value: "they" are all thieves, or "they" are all immoral, since "they" are all engaged in swindling, drug trafficking, prostitution, or sedition. Any and every kind of outsider — from whatever other region, country, ethnicity, or religion — is threatened with such stigmatization.[3] Tensions arising from incipient class or ethnic relations are thus cast as ethical judgments. Recognizing the ethical dimension of these tensions helps to explain the uncompromising absoluteness that accompanies group conflict, in a manner that "rational choice" analyses cannot adequately capture. Studies of identity formation and interethnic conflict in Central Eurasia must pay serious attention to the moral convictions that motivate individuals and groups to act and speak as they do. However, it would be a reductionist error of the first order either to collapse ethics into economics or politics on one hand, or, on the other hand, to treat it as a cultural "residue" representing "traditional mentality." The subjects whom we study are sentient beings as complex and fully human as ourselves, and whose moral sensibilities implicate political logics and economic rationalities in multilayered and complex ways.

Anyone who doubts the significance of the ethical dimension to understanding important macro-scale phenomena should consider the appeal of Islam and attraction of authoritarianism in post-Soviet Central Asia. These very phenomena are not, for Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan for example, simply resurgences of a pre-Soviet or Soviet past. They are instead novel responses to post-Soviet conditions, based upon moral sensibilities about authority that were originally produced within local Soviet Central Asian contexts (Liu 2002). These Uzbeks value Islam because it cultivates virtuous individuals and peaceful, productive communities by establishing, among other things, proper relations of authority between people (Liu 2000). These Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan advocate a ruthless but benevolent rule that exercises discipline over or training of the people [*tarbiya*], the supposed purpose of which is to prepare them for political and economic liberalization (Liu 2003). In their political imagination President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan is seen as a paternalistic figure with a moral charge to oversee the development of the land and its people. To be sure, this khan-like image of a post-Soviet Central Asian president — notably cultivated by Karimov's astute self-identification with Timur (Tamerlane) — can be a cynical strategy of power (Manz 2002). To be sure, some in the region use Islam as a way to speak to the economic disenfranchisement that others experience. Yet even those behaviors tap into deep convictions about the ethical nature of political authority. The value of a "fatherly steward" that is ascribed to the ruler and the value of a "community-builder" that is ascribed to Islam are central to the significance and potency of authoritarianism and Muslim identity as social forces in Central Asia today.

Critical Awareness of Neoliberalism

The accumulated findings of contemporary field research discussed above — which represent but a sample of all the work available — illustrate how the ethical dimension of social thought and action is revealed at the detailed level of the small scale, where people create unexpected responses to

[3] A stigmatized outsider can come from a nearby region (Humphrey 2002a). Roma ("Gypsies") are a most notable ethnic outsider group throughout Central Eurasia (Lemon 2000: 56-79). Regarding religious outsiders in Central Eurasia today, there are local converts to Protestant Christianity and to Islamist movements, so-called "Wahhabis," a word employed throughout the region to index their foreignness and militancy at least as much as any particular doctrinal orientation (Knysh 2002).

the pressing circumstances of everyday life.[4] Although this argument represents a decidedly anthropological perspective on the state of Central Eurasian studies today, I would hardly seek to make anthropologists out of scholars with other disciplinary backgrounds (whether in the social sciences or in the humanities), and still less out of policy-makers or their advisors. I would instead offer the above examples as evidence for the value of grounding our views of the region in small-scale, actually occurring social contexts, even if this means foregoing clean-cut, all-explaining answers. This research in postsocialist societies has already made indispensable contributions to both methodology and actual research findings by showing it is possible to discern important regularities without losing sight of complications on the ground. Cooperative interdisciplinary dialogue will allow the profitable integration of these advantages into other modes of analysis.

A concluding insight emerging from the examples presented here is the need for a critical awareness of neoliberalism, and specifically in the Central Eurasian context. If disincentives felt on the ground are subverting the development of civil society; if liberal intentions end up reinforcing illiberal patriarchy in the *mahalla*; if trade liberalization has resulted not in modern capitalist modes of distribution but instead in a panoply of unforeseen economic arrangements; if people yearn for authoritarian rule because they believe it is for their own good; or if the results of Westernized policy interventions are consistently falling short of predictions by grand theory: then we must question whether something is happening other than an "incomplete transition" to neoliberal outcomes. Will "freeing" a society from socialism and dictatorship inevitably set it on a course toward capitalism and democracy as we recognize them? Can we not concede that the multi-dimensional complexity of possibility means we cannot predict how these societies will actually develop? Neoliberalism — like every other "-ism" that claims to inaugurate a utopian epoch of human civilization if not "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) — is but a collection of concepts and institutional practices, the development and deployment of which are themselves historically contingent and path-dependent (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1999; Paley 2002).

The field of Central Eurasian studies contains the exciting possibility of criticizing and modulating the self-assured triumphalism of strident neoliberal doctrine applied to the region. Research attentive to the reality on the ground can sensitize neoliberal projects to the particular complexities of the region's everyday life. Those who believe in the liberalization of Central Eurasia and consciously work towards that goal must ask hard questions about the unintended effects of their policies. They must, if need be, have the courage radically to rethink cherished neoliberal preconceptions about social development and political change. Only unflinching engagement with these realities and only genuine collaboration with Central Eurasians as equals will yield contextually effective approaches to transforming the region's societies and economies. The alternative is to become a perhaps unwitting accomplice in yet another utopian project promising prosperity and security to the whole of humankind, blind to the detours that emerge from closer scrutiny and attention to context.

[4] Many more such case studies can be found in the cited edited volumes (Berdahl, Bunzl and Lampland 2000; Burawoy and Verdery 1999b; Hann 2002b; Humphrey 2002d); in the new book series *Culture and Society after Socialism* from Cornell University Press, edited by Bruce Grant and Nancy Ries; in the journal *Anthropology of East Europe Review* (whose purview overlaps with the Central Eurasian region), and at the annual conferences of *Soyuz: the Network of Post-Communist Cultural Studies*, which is an interest group within the *American Anthropological Association.*

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