Article

SOCIALIST/POSTSOCIALIST STUDIES AND THE GLOBAL LEFT: A CRITICAL COMMENTARY

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Abstract

This commentary addresses the marginal presence of authors, subjects, and issues focused on former socialist countries in Eastern and Central Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union in "socialist studies" produced in Western English-language based academic journals, as well as the so-called "global political Left" these publications support. The commentary suggests that the gap is epistemological, emotional, and serving to protect conversations about "socialism" from the deep critique and interrogation of socialist theories, utopias, and practices generated in the emerging field of "postsocialist studies" originating in former socialist states and societies associated with a geopolitical "East."

Keywords

Socialist studies, postsocialism, former socialist states, emotions and knowledge, transitional and global left

A recent stream of social scientific studies, blogs and newspaper editorials addresses the emergence of a twenty-first century "global" and "transnational political Left" (ex. Feffer 2019; Kratasli 2019). Labor unions and socialist political parties have provided a strong spine for the formation for this global Left. The Socialist International, for example, has led a transnational alliance of 135 socialist, social democratic and labour parties and organizations that play an important role in national and local politics. Less structured alliances such as the World Social Forum have also linked internationally local social movements dedicated to anti-globalisation, fair trade, human rights, anti-racism, and environmental justice (Sandbrook 2014). These and other alliances supporting the global Left are made visible and intelligible through narratives: internationally published and disseminated popular, political and social scientific discourses clarifying and giving meaning to socialism, capitalism, neoliberalism, democracy, and social justice as both concepts and social, cultural and political practice (Noël and Thérien 2008).

This critical commentary focuses on socialist studies that are part of the discursive stream manifesting the presence of the global Left. It focuses especially on social scientific discourses

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theorising "socialism" in the English language and published in the geopolitical West. Despite local and national linguistic, cultural and political heterogeneity, English has been the dominant language of communication in the global Left. Therefore, influential journals such as *Socialist Studies* published by the Canadian Society for Socialist Studies, *International Socialism: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Theory* associated with the Socialist Workers Party in the United Kingdom, and *Socialism and Democracy* published by the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy in the United States have provided shared space, key political concepts, theoretical frames, research-based findings and ideological and epistemological rigor to activism and international organising in the Left. I am interested in the conceptual and geopolitical parameters of these leading, English-speaking publications, as well as the emotions embedded in the constructions of "socialism" they disseminate in a world marked by the demise of the former Soviet Union and socialist states and societies in Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans. That period in world history after the collapse of socialist states in the late 1980s and early 1990s provides the broader context wherein I locate and analyse the emotional and political aspects of socialist epistemes produced in the West.

Socialist studies, like the rest of the academic disciplines, present a site of knowledge production driven by emotions that vary in kind and intensity; yet curiosity, doubt, fear, hope (and in some cases jealousy and ego) often prompt, guide and sustain intellectual activities and research, leading to the production of knowledge (Brun and Kunetzle 2008). Such emotions are embedded in socialist studies produced in the West, illuminating further the state of mind of those constructing them. Emotions also determine who and what is privileged or marginalised in the production of knowledge about socialism, dovetailing questions about power relations and gaps that also mark the global political Left. Therein, activists and movements from former socialist countries are barely present. That lack, I suggest, could be attributed to emotional protectionism and the inability of socialist studies, socialist movements, and self-identified socialist academics and activists in the West to engage in meaningful ways ideas and intellectuals from former socialist countries who are critical of capitalism but *doubtful* about the potentials of socialism to support just societies.

Socialist Studies "East" and "West"

There was a time and place wherein "socialist studies" were much more international, epistemologically diverse and open minded. In the 1960s, critical ideas about socialism as everyday life and material and political practice crystalised in an extraordinary journal published by a group of Marxist philosophers located in former Yugoslavia. The journal was called *Praxis* and laid the foundations of theories related to "democratic socialism" generated from within the experiences and direct observations of individuals living in socialist states. The Yugoslav Praxis group envisioned democratic socialism by activating a geopolitically and intellectually inclusive "penetrating critique" produced by scholars, researchers, activists, and students who revised,

extended, clarified and, in some cases, rejected Marxist and socialist theories of the "good society" (Sher 1977). The editors of *Praxis* shared the belief that such penetrating critique required international and diverse voices connecting peoples and ideas across the Cold War divides. The Praxis group further understood that difference and multiplicity would support rich theorizing and deep knowledge they called "the critique of all existing conditions:" *capitalist and socialist alike.* Therefore, the Yugoslav group published their journal internationally and in multiple languages: a publishing practice inspired by a long tradition of so-called "thick journals" originating in Russia, where intellectuals used various forms of expression to articulate (and also hide) political and intellectual dissent. The epistemological and political courage of the Yugoslav group and their journal *Praxis* enacted a mode of socialist studies that supported international collectives of scholars and activists across East and West who focused on socialism as both theory/utopia and actual state, social and economic practice. It is true that some of these collectives remained steeped in Eurocentricity yet contributors to the journal swung to the political left and right thus fostering epistemological heterogeneity, contradictions, and impassionate debates that pushed "socialist studies" further and ahead.

Unlike *Praxis*, contemporary leading Canadian, British, and American socialist studies journals are not doing such bridgework and connecting; rather, these publications support a Western epistemological and emotional safe space, wherein "socialism" is embraced but not interrogated. By interrogation, I mean critical and often devastating critique produced by a stream of scholarship originating in former socialist countries and authored by intellectuals who actually lived under state socialism. This kind of experiential and deep analysis of socialism is also referred to as "postsocialism" and "postsocialist studies:" unhyphenated signifiers representing scholarship that documents and theorises the material and social realities in different socialist states and the reasons why they did not and could not last and prosper. Postsocialist studies challenge especially socialism's, liberalism's and capitalism's gendered, sexed, and racialised foundational premises and promises simultaneously, gesturing to the need for imaginations that transcend these modern ideologies and support novel social forms.

Socialist studies in the West have been slow to recognise or embrace the postsocialist gesture. I conducted recently an informal survey of English language texts dedicated to socialism and postsocialism in academic libraries covering the period from the year 2000 to the present. My search used keywords derived from the various spelling, hyphenation and adjective forms of the words "socialism," "post-socialism," "communism" and "post-communism." The search revealed an important trend: marginal and limited presence of former socialist countries and authors in these houses of knowledge. For example, an online search in the United States Library of Congress catalogue generated 21,916 titles dedicated to "socialism" versus 3,046 publications focused on "post-socialism" published in the same time period. A search in the online catalogue of the Libraries of the University of Toronto where I teach yielded over 2 million items (books, academic and newspaper articles, reviews, websites) dedicated to socialism and communism compared to

the significantly lower number of publications (43,082) dedicated to postsocialism and post-communism combined. This trend is extended by leading journals in the socialist studies field.

For example, the Canadian Society for Socialist Studies journal's online catalogue lists peer-reviewed articles published between the years 2005 and 2022. Although abstracts feature foreign countries such as Bolivia, China, South Korea, Japan, Cuba and South Africa, a manual count shows that only six articles focus on a single former socialist country, in this case Soviet Russia considered in relation to Bolshevik and Soviet ideologues and leaders Trotsky, Lenin and Yeltsin (ex. Brittain 2007, Baker 2008, Kellogg 2010). The U.S.- based journal *Socialism and Democracy* online database contains over 120 articles and book reviews published since 1997. The international scope of this knowledge is evident from the dozen countries featured in these items. Yet, I counted only 12 articles that discuss a total of 4 former socialist countries: Yugoslavia, Poland, Russia and the German Democratic Republic (ex. Kagarlitski 1998, Noctummes & Page 1999; Dale 2002, Aage 2005, Shields 2011, Štiks 2015, Kuzmarov 2019). Likewise, the British journal *International Socialism: A Quarterly Review of Socialist Theory* has featured over a dozen countries, as well as multiple regions of the world between the years 2000 and 2022. Of those, only 14 articles discuss 5 former socialist countries: Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, former East Germany and former Czechoslovakia (ex. Murphy 2007, Fabry 2009, Rose 2011, Ferguson 2014, Tamas 2016, Tengely-Evans 2018, 2022).

This uneven discursive landscape reflects political gaps in the so-called "global political Left." The World Social Forum annual meetings, for example, have seen substantial representation of activists and organisations from Western countries, many of them advancing socialist values, movements and projects (Chase-Dunn et al 2009). The absence of people and organisations from former socialist countries in earlier forums, as well as their still marginal participation in more recent iterations of the forum has prompted a distinctly geopolitical East vs. West analysis. Observers in the West criticise former socialist peoples for lack of political involvement in the forums dedicated to social and economic justice, while pointing to violations of human rights and political corruption in these societies. The European Social Forum held a meeting in Budapest, Hungary in 2011 in order to involve more closely former socialist states in the region in public policies addressing these problems. However, analysis by self-identified postsocialist intellectuals from Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans invite Western critics to recognise that their notions of activism and critical understanding of "democracy," Marxist critique of "capitalism" and embrace of "socialism" are not universal or universally shared by all peoples, certainly not by many citizens of countries emerging out of state socialism (Gagyi 2015). This ideological and epistemological disjuncture is emotional as well.

Emotional Knowledges "East" and "West"

For those of us who lived through state socialism, politics are marked by disillusionment (Svašek 2006). Many of us are discontent with *both* socialism and capitalism and such disaffection

is a powerful emotion involving loss of political idealism, pragmatism for the purpose of survival, and doubt and mistrust in ideological and utopian promises for a great future based on socialist or Marxist principles which muted but did not undo patriarchal, racialised, ethnic, sexist and class inequalities and structures. For those of us born and raised in former socialist countries, socialism is our past; for socialists and Marxists in the West, it is their desired future and the just societies they seek. Postsocialist epistemologies of doubt produced from within former socialist countries present an emotional threat to socialist studies in the West, undermining especially the hope and intellectual safety they create for students and scholars committed to Marxist theory and socialist futures.

Scholarship published in such safe spaces tends to be aspirational as it addresses overwhelmingly what socialism is in theory, what it could do for Western capitalist societies, how it endures in countries such as Cuba, or how it has empowered anti-racism and anti-colonial struggles in the global North and South. In contrast, deeper conversations about how socialist and Marxist theories and ideology inspired, governed and helped organise social and economic life in former socialist states and why these formations did not prosper remains marginal in these journals. The gap serves to protect the idea of "socialism," and related Marxist theories, from a critique and ontological studies that undermine significantly the potency of socialism to deliver social justice and equality. Such protection further shields socialist studies in the West from facing fully and directly the realities of lived socialisms in Central Asia, Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans that cast a dark cloud on the powerful belief that "socialism" could be achieved and could thrive in the West. Western critics of capitalism must sustain that belief, otherwise hope is lost and disillusionment creeps into the very heart of socialist studies, paralysing political action as well.

For example, while delivering a special lecture in 2005, the prominent American Marxist economist David Laibman associated former socialist states and subjects with dangerous "splitting" effects (308). According to Laibman, the collapse of socialist states in Europe and the former Soviet Union divided the political Left in Western countries and globally. Pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet fractions further weakened the American Left and discredited anti-capitalist forces that play important role in fomenting pro-unionism and expansion of the American welfare state. David Laibman also associated former socialist societies with "haunting" and "biting" the present and future of the socialist idea in the United States and the world, further inhibiting "a robust image of a socialist alternative, both realistic and inspiring (306)." Such image, Laibman explained, is "absolute necessity" to counter "the shit" piled up by these failed socialist countries which are also responsible for the global advancement of capital (306). A positive image of "socialism" could also make it "attractive" again and give it much needed "new prestige" in this postsocialist moment (307, 317).

Similar epistemological anxiety relieved by de-linking former socialist countries from discussions about "socialism" could be detected in other narratives dubbed "socialist studies." For example, in an often-cited piece answering the questions "What is Socialism? What are Socialist Studies?" Elaine Coburn (2009) writes that part of the endeavor called socialist studies is "particular

responsibility to study the so-called Communist nations…" yet "confront these regimes claims to be socialist (11)." Such de-linking of peoples who attempted to build socialist economies and societies and the "socialism" defined by Marxist and Western intellectuals such as Coburn further produces epistemic security sought after by thinkers who avoid being challenged or invalidated by postsocialist studies focused on the former socialist "East." The avoidance entails persistent narration of former socialist states as not truly socialist and, the revolutionaries and political elites governing those countries, not really "Marxist."

Studies and theorising of "democratic socialism" also depend upon similar de-linking related to emotion, in this case fear of invalidation that undermines the self-confidence and utopic visions marshalled by socialist intellectuals in the West. Looking back across twenty years of research and publishing by the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy established in the United States, founding member Frank Rosengarten (2011) explicitly positioned the relationship between socialism and democracy at the center of the question about the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe. The author also suggested that the mobilisation of the theory that former socialist countries did not survive because they were undemocratic was essential to keeping socialism on the agenda of social and political debates in the West. Lack of "democracy" in former socialist countries has become the leitmotif of Western socialist studies: democracy and socialism "go back to the time of Marx," contributors to the field argue; hence, these intellectuals committed to "democratic socialism" do not consider former socialist countries really "Marxist" as well (Wallis 2011).

Importantly, these constructs of untrue, corrupted and ideal Marxist and socialist forms are generated within historical East-West geopolitical, cultural and racialised relationships of power, wherein Western academics and activists have taken the role of examiners and judges of who and what belongs where on that hierarchy of Marxist and socialist types. According to these intellectuals, "genuine" versions of socialism and Marxism appear to somehow belong to the West whose strong democratic traditions constitute the potent ground for building real and truly socialist and Marxist future. But in the mind of doubtful postsocialist observers, such as this author, very important questions pertaining to so-called "democratic socialism" remain unanswered by socialist studies produced in the West: How exactly will Western societies whose historical records of "democracy" are defined by persisting (post)colonialism, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and violence foster "true socialism" out of these oppressions? How exactly will socialist social forms requiring new consciousness flourish amid and on top of racist material structures and liberal and neoliberal cultures expressing yet inspiring human desire to compete, accumulate material goods to feel safe, and stand out and differ from other people? What role exactly will the state play in the making of a "socialist Canada" or "socialist United States," for example, and how will the guardians of pure forms of socialist democracy prevent the consolidation of a too strong and violent state tasked with the re-distribution of wealth and power in their societies, so they do not end up being a Western version of the former Soviet Union? Or, if not the state, who and what exactly will carry out the epochal-in-scale redistribution of wealth and privileges demanded by socialism among already competing for resources social groups identified by race, ethnicity,

religion, sexuality, disability, age, education, class and other proliferating differences flourishing under the auspices of liberalism obsessed with "freedom" mistaken for demands based on group self-interests?

Socialist studies in the West are yet to engage with these questions rigorously and in relation the postsocialist knowledge produced by intellectuals in former socialist states. Little of the newly published research on socialist state colonisation, racialisation, gendered state governmentalities, and the violence of socialist states and economies against women and minorities has been covered by these journals. Rather, these journals overwhelmingly embrace socialism, shielding it from the critical research and theories advanced by these postsocialist works authored by intellectuals resisting the violence, patriarchy, racism and imperialism of both socialism and capitalism. Until we are able to debate these oppressions underlining both socialism and capitalism openly and together, and across East, West, global North and South, the so-called "transnational political Left" will remain what it is now: a fractured, incomplete and uneven formation trying to represent knowledges, needs and emotions that are neither similar nor equal.

How socialist studies produced in the geopolitical West react to the challenge of bridging the gaps beneath the global Left, this comment suggests, will determine further if we are able to form a genuine transnational political alliance where "socialist studies" connect us. Such connection could support scholarship, theories, and imaginations capable of transcending the limitations of modern ideologies to the left, right and center, supporting further social, political, cultural and economic innovation rooted in multiplicity of ideas and different ways of knowing that meet each other and debate "socialism," "social justice" and a shared "future" together and as equals.

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