

Introduction

Scholars from different disciplines are seeking to construct the new field of post-communism, which has been created by the implosion of the communist regime. They explore the most important dimensions of the differences between various types of space and geographical territories: the spaces of identity and the social, political and geopolitical spaces in certain countries of Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia), the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia) and the Russian world and its Eurasian borders (Russia, Mongolia, Buriatia, Kazakhstan, Moldavia and the Baltic states) not to mention the borders of the Middle or Far Eastern communist world (descriptions of China and the Middle East).

This transdisciplinary approach has proved particularly fertile in meeting the institutional and intellectual challenges of research in specific regional fields such as Eastern Europe and its eastern borders. Such research has tended to be confined within a regional or national exceptionalism, which seems outdated today, given the rapid pace of global change since the end of the cold war (issues of transition).

The field of post-communist studies is now less and less the preserve of a group of specialists in that area and increasingly open to those with a comparative approach to the development of the world's different cultural zones. It is this type of approach that has been adopted here. As a result post-communist studies have been restored to their historical context. Global change also encourages us to take new stock of issues and policies for economic development, of environmental policies, human rights, public health issues and so on.

A number of essential tasks now face the different disciplines that are beginning to approach this area via a range of themes:

– the reconstruction of identities it was long left to the historians and sociologists to undertake long term comparisons of the national and multinational societies that have emerged from the old empires, relocating them in the current context in order to evaluate both the mutations of political paradigms and the legacy of the Soviet imperialist regime. The advent of globalisation demands that cultural production be taken into account: the assessment of the impact of this production on local identities and cultures, and of the role of the latter two in the recomposition of spaces, whether through synergy or resistance, is an unavoidable issue for most disciplines, including the field of literature.

The different authors have approached these reconstructions in different ways: a redefinition of the fundamental political concepts of historically constituted formations (concepts of equality, people, nation, ethnicity, the place of the individual, etc.), relations between groups positioned in a hierarchy according to the evolutionist frameworks current under communism (Wanda Dressler), gender relationships (Helena Zdravomyslova), an evaluation of the contemporary rewriting of history (Speranta Dumitru), the recent history of social and national traumas (Caroline Humphrey), the analysis of the (re)-construction of territorially-based identities (Roberte N. Hamayon), and

representations designed to ensure the permanence of constructed entities, renaissance (Eurasia), dissolution, or simply promotion through the reconstruction of spheres of influence (Cherifa Chaour), and the generalisation of the western model that gives rise to an idealised or disillusioned view of the West (Artan Fuga).

– socio-spatial relationships and economic reconstruction: geographers analyse the transitional economy in terms of new modes of urban life (Philippe Haeringer, Leonid Kogan, Galia and Guy Burgel), the impact of the symbolic practices and ideological representations of the communist regime on conceptions of work and modalities of exchange (Ivaylo Ditchev), economic and financial reconstruction (Jacques Sapir, Françoise Renversez);

– the reconstruction of power: monitoring the evolution of states into new forms, a process by no means exclusive to the ex-Soviet bloc, is a matter for both political science and political philosophy; the establishment of autonomous regimes granted to minorities is, in the first instance, addressed by anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists and jurists.

In particular this collection considers the formation and role of elites during and after communism, through the use of imagery (Roberte N. Hamayon and Caroline Humphrey), the three circles of conversion (Georges Mink and Jean-Charles Szurek), forms of political, and particularly ecological, struggle and the construction of a civil society and environmental policies (Jean-Robert Raviot, Armelle Groppo, Yves Hamant). Several pieces deal with issues relating to the adoption of new legal frameworks integrating citizenship and nationality, the evolving forms of national parties and institutions in specific situations and modifications of the international context.

Together these themes mark the end of the euphoria of studies on transition and of unshakeable confidence in Euro-American practices and institutions. These targeted studies combine different areas of expertise, methods and approaches to study the entirely new socio-economic, cultural and political forms now taking shape before our eyes. Our general aim here was to combine specialised research with theoretical approaches, to study empirical facts alongside the representations associated with them. The intersection of different disciplines, fostering the articulation of studies on the macro and micro scales, is a highly important dimension of these issues as a whole.¹

Wanda Dressler

Note

1. This collection contains some of the texts from a transdisciplinary seminar held in 2000–2001. The seminar brought together a range of disciplines working on the postcommunist space, including elements from the doctoral module 'Économie, Organisation, Société' and other doctoral modules (knowledge and culture, political and legal science) offered by the UFR of Slavonic Languages and Civilisation in the Department of Sociologie at the University of Paris-X Nanterre, as well as invited speakers from elsewhere. After each paper a respondent gave comments, some of which we have published here. In 2001 the university of Paris-X Nanterre will launch a strand on the Central European, Balkan and Eastern countries (the Russian world and Eurasian borders) in the contemporary period, supported by the large Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, as well as the combined courses (sociology/geography and sociology/history/history of art) and integrated courses (sociology/Russian), enlarging the range of dual courses offered.