

Caroline Humphrey: *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*

Ithaca 2002: Cornell University Press, xxvii, 265 pp.

To speak about the transition of post-socialist countries as its neo-liberals designers have would be a cruel irony. The case of Russia is an example of a laissez-faire failure par excellence – the traffic jam of Muscovite Mercedes registered by a World Bank economist notwithstanding. The readers of Caroline Humphrey, a ‘founding mother’ of the anthropology of socialism and post-socialism, will not be surprised. Her work has provided readers with reasons for scepticism about the adequateness of the great narrative of neo-liberal globalism. Humphrey’s accounts of (post-)Soviet reality have conveyed the message, ‘the history is present and here to stay’. Indeed, the failure of the one-size-fits-all prescriptions of shock therapy was overdetermined. The outcome of transformation policies has been shaped not only by the design of the policies as such but also by the inherited conditions, meanings, interpretations, expectations, and strategies.

One of the few non-Soviet scholars with substantial field experience in the former Soviet Union, Humphrey became famous for her *Karl Marx Collective: Economy and Society in a Siberian Collective Farm* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983]. Based on her first trip to eastern Siberia in 1967 and a later visit in 1975, this magisterial study depicts the surprisingly rich Soviet reality in Siberia. She describes the *kolektiv* enterprise ‘Karl Marx’, which managed to achieve seemingly unrealisable goals by exploiting the possibilities offered by the language of the socialist era.

Her most recent publication, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life*, is a selection of essays in economic anthropology from the hectic decade between 1991 and 2001. The chapters of the book were “written as events were taking place” (p. xvii). The collection provides a

“chronicle of the dismantling Soviet life that at the same time has brought about many new kinds of activity and new rationales” (p. xvii).

The volume is organised into three parts. In part I, ‘The Politics of Locality in an Unstable State’, Humphrey utilises Appadurai’s notion of ‘localities’ (people’s own worlds of values) to analyse the social and symbolic dislocation produced by the disintegration of Soviet institutions and by volatile prices. The main message she wants to convey is that in post-socialist Russia the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ remain deeply entangled and that the Russian political economy on all levels, from household to society, implies also a moral economy. It “reifies social boundaries and stigmatizes those cast outside” (p. xxii). The disruption of the old protective institutions has led to the unfolding of new forms of resource protection, such as the mafia, and has reinforced neo-feudal patron-client relations. While it strengthened the power of managers, who control both production and distribution, privatisation left the social relations of production intact. Humphrey illuminates the complex rationing system of coupons, talons, and orders that made people fatally dependent on the all-encompassing workplace. They had no money to trade outside and the majority of services were provided at the workplace. The autonomy of enterprise has been further reinforced by the intricate economic system, based largely on barter in the absence of any state regulation of exchange. Thus, a system has emerged that is based on particularism and trust. This has created favourable conditions for the existence/operations of the mafia and other protective institutions. The system is quite popular among those who are involved, since most people think they can gain from it. However, being excluded from the system becomes a disastrous problem. Humphrey dedicates a chapter to the fate of those not involved and describes one semio-logical battle: the mythical constructions of ‘the dispossessed’ and Russian polity. Humphrey concludes the first part with an ac-

count of the moral economy of consumption in Moscow of the early 1990s. She establishes a temporal connection between the present patterns of spending and the constitution of consumption under the Soviet regime. The actual practice is driven by value-laden perceptions: the experience of deception, the exposure to global values, and the projection of moral ideas concerning the political economy.

The second part, 'Strategies beyond the Law', explains how new categories of actors and activities have exploited the frontier space of the gaps between local polities, such as provincial republics, provinces, or cities. It also reveals the structural and cultural mechanisms which reflect and reproduce crucial elements of Soviet and pre-Soviet society, while simultaneously dismantling or radically reconfiguring them. The first essay in this section classifies the categories of social actors and the peculiar institutions engaged in trade. The values and representations through which people understand the world occupy a crucial role in Humphrey's explanation of forms of mass trade and economic action; hence her elucidation of why the interstitial activity of mobile traders is regarded with suspicion and seen as creating disorder. The chapter that follows depicts the cultural world of racketeers – people who use the threat of force to extract profits from any weakly protected resource. The racketeers create parallel relations of power within and beyond legitimate institutions. While acknowledging the functionalist explanation of the structural role that the racketeers play in the absence of state regulation of property relations, Humphrey focuses on the historical dynamics of these phenomena. She distinguishes "the structure of the racket from the values, symbolism, and legitimacy attributed to it and from the social production of the kinds of persons who engage in it" (p. 101). 'Rackets' are culturally distinctive groupings which use techniques that evolved out of the earlier Soviet context. The final chapter of the second part offers a re-

efined description of the processes and complex meanings that in the Russian context are designated with the umbrella term 'bribery'. She shows how the meaning and practice of bribery is situated in networks of 'collectivities' and structured according to class.

The last part, 'Rethinking Personhood', contains four chapters that deal with the politics of identity in the post-Soviet space and with individual coping strategies. It examines the ways people constitute and examine personhood and morality in everyday life. The opening chapter is a textbook example of an outstanding 'thick description' of the author's trip to a new shrine in Mongolia. It examines the issues of trust, theft, conscience and the human relation to nature. The chapter on villas of the 'New Russians', the people that made a fortune in the new economy, also deserves to be mentioned. It analyses their material culture in order to provide a portrait of this peculiar class and to depict the difficulties, subversions, and disputes surrounding their identity.

The Unmaking of Soviet Life is a collection of essays, each of which has its own history. It is therefore understandable that the volume lacks a single analytical strategy. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace the underlying analytical logic of Humphrey's inquiry. Influenced by Foucault and Gramsci, Humphrey's main point of focus is the dynamics of power in everyday relations and in economic activity in particular. Her analytical strategy employs three methods of inspection simultaneously. First, she provides a close and readable description of the details of everyday social practices in Russia. The author helps us to comprehend or at least take a look inside the post-Soviet social reality. She achieves this not only by providing us with unique data, but also by turning the data into theory. Second, her principal method of explanation is the interpretation of the way in which people conceive general social configurations, the ways in which social actors represent the social practices that

they experience or observe. For Humphrey, culture is not primarily theoretically important as a constraint that prevents the achievement of desirable goals (e.g. generalising the market or establishing democracy); instead, it is important as the capacity to enable – it is culture that allows actors to think, speak, and act. As a primary point of focus, meaning makes space “available to individuals to take particular decision among a range of conceivable actions” (p. xix). Humphrey has thus heard Verdery’s call to fill in the gap in post-socialist studies – and to theorise on the production of meaning [Verdery 1991. “Theorizing Socialism.” *American Ethnologist* 18: 419–439.]. Her theoretical interest prevents us from falling under the influence of the ‘new orientalism’ in our approach to Russian social reality (e.g. the complex umbrella-concept of ‘bribe’ that is often misunderstood by outsiders). Moreover, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life* develops the reader’s understanding of the very meaning of such basic terms as money, profit, and (economic) motive, which have a peculiar sense in the post-Soviet context.

When explaining the structure of meaning, Humphrey employs a third method of inspection, the discernment of historical roots and wider structural contexts of practices. Humphrey’s theoretical emphasis on path-dependency, which her work establishes with convincing empirical evidence, makes a strong case against the popular teleological notion of the post-communist transition. Despite this temporal analytical primacy, Humphrey does not fall into the intellectual trap of persistent historical overdetermination, an extreme expression of which is the notion of (post-)socialism as a form of Oriental (read also as non-Western) despotism. On the contrary, she is well aware of the causal power of structural factors and the theoretical importance of recent policies. Thus, for instance, she describes how the actions of the state have created niches, which racketeers are able to exploit. Similarly, her manifest focus on images and meanings is

actually much broader, given the importance she assigns to the structural factors in her analysis.

The intentional avoidance of ‘big’ abstract concepts that, apart from ideological utility, have not proved to have much analytical or theoretical strength (e.g. civil society) is one of Humphrey’s virtues. Yet, her analysis is not at all a-theoretical; on the contrary, it is a dialogue and critique of many theories of post-socialist transformation. Nevertheless – and this is my main objection – this critical dialogue is too often only implicit; it lacks a more explicit connection to the discourse of social theory. This is certainly a pity, as Humphrey has a strong case to make. My explanation is that this limitation represents the main divide between anthropology and sociology: a stylistic difference. Despite the stylistic affiliation to anthropology, Humphrey’s work demonstrates the poverty of the sociology-anthropology distinction – it is neither sociology nor anthropology but a *social analysis* at its best.

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Martin Myant: *The Rise and Fall of Czech Capitalism*

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The road from a “backward and inefficient centrally-planned economy into weak, unstable and inefficient market economy” (p. 262) is how Martin Myant describes the Czech transformation. Readers of the book will find a good deal of well collated information and essentially a comprehensive summary of everything that went on in Czech politics and in the economic policy of the Czech government in the years 1990–2002. The publication can serve not only as a handbook but also as a challenge to a deeper understanding of the past development and the current situation.