Sight and Touch between East and West
Ethics, Ethnography and Social Theory

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ABSTRACT
In this Forum contribution, I develop the idea of the learnings of post-socialism beyond Eastern Europe. I propose retaining the distinctness of the peripheral vision ‘from the East’ and purposely keeping its ‘provinciality’ in order to illuminate the qualities and shortcomings of the theory at the centre. The note starts with an ethnographic encounter in Riga and draws on it to show how the peripheral vision of post-socialist Eastern Europe can challenge the stubborn boundary between morality and social theory.

KEYWORDS
embodiment, ethnography, nationalism, post-socialism, social theory

I am sympathetic to the proposition of interrogating the epistemic boundaries of post-socialism and to explore what this concept can offer to other fields of knowledge. In one of the articles in this theme issue, Ognjen Kojanić suggests that postsocialism provides a peripheral vision that allows seeing the global political economy in a multi-scalar, relational way. This peripheral vision allows seeing both the centre and the margin as related, recognising socio-political processes as global and as interlinking the centre and the periphery. I am not disclosing a secret by saying that practices of governance and forms of social relations have been tried out first and in most extreme ways in colonies (the second and the third world), to then be implemented in ‘the centre’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Stoler 2009). Also, in this issue, Francisco Martínez offers an analysis of global postsocialism from one such peripheral place, Narva, in Estonia. In his Narvaology, he roams this border-zone and catalogues the objects and sites that show the transnational in the local, and back.

In this contribution, I wish to further develop the idea of the learnings of post-socialism beyond Eastern Europe, and suggest another avenue for such theory (re-)work. Instead of reclaiming the anthropology of post-socialism as global rather than local, this alternative avenue retains the distinctness of the peripheral vision and purposely keeps its ‘provinciality’ in order to illuminate the qualities and shortcomings
of the theory ‘at the centre’ (cf. Chakrabarty 2000). To do so, I offer
a sensory, rather than scalar approach that might trouble some of the
established categories of Western social theory. Let me begin with an
encounter that brought these issues home for me. It serves here as an
‘ethnographic moment’ (Strathern 1999), an encounter that opens up
a way to do theory with ethnography.

I remember hugging a friend of mine I had not seen for several
months, on one of my trips to Riga. As she approached me and we
embraced, I recall noticing that she was wearing a scarf decorated
with traditional Latvian ornaments. It was a wool knit scarf, the vari-
ous symbols in white creating a rhythmic pattern on a dark red back-
ground, the two colours of the Latvian flag. Scarves like hers had
become popular in Latvia in recent years. Many could be spotted on
the streets of Riga and television journalists would wear them when
appearing on the evening news. Similar motifs were printed on belts
and t-shirts and other clothing items and accessories.

I recall my sense of unease about my friend wearing the scarf, in
the moment of our embrace. Maybe this discomfort arose because of
my own ambivalent sense of belonging; maybe I was disturbed by the
possibility that the country where I had grown up might have changed
while I had been away; maybe it took me aback because I had always
felt that my friend and I were very alike. We had attended the same
high school in the 1990s and had moved on to pursue graduate educa-
tion abroad in the 2000s (although I had stayed abroad while she had
returned to Latvia). We were part of the generation born in the Soviet
Latvian Republic of the 1980s that came of age in the newly indepen-
dent Latvia, during the years of democratisation. We grew up with the
narrative of Europeanisation, progress and modernisation as Latvia
was joining the EU and NATO. But suddenly, this feeling of alikeness
was troubled by the ‘nationalist’ scarf. She became an Other, display-
ning her national belonging in a way that seemed excessive to me.

There is often a certain uneasiness about Eastern Europe, when
looked at ‘from the West’ (Rander 2019; Wolff 1994). It often seems
not quite to fit in, or not quite to make sense. This was the case when
in the 1990s the Western feminists were struck by many East Euro-
pean women reluctant to seek emancipation and instead eager to stay
at home and raise children (Gal and Kligman 2000). Just this year,
there was a march again for gender justice on International Women’s
Day in London, while the Latvian media were showing the usual pic-
tures from the streets of Riga with men busy buying tulips and roses in
flower markets and hurrying to their offices and homes to offer these
to their female colleagues, wives and mothers. There were few protests and few social movements emerging out of the 2009 economic crisis in Eastern Europe, while Occupy and Podemos were gathering masses in Southern Europe against austerity (Ozoliņa 2019a; Sommers and Woolfson 2014).

The East European version of nationalism – labelled ‘ethnonationalism’ – is feared as uncivilised and dangerous in comparison to the Western ‘civic nationalism’, even as the former is now becoming mainstream in the old democracies across the Western world. It is mapped and analysed, even as anthropologists and sociologists are aware of the kinds of hierarchies of knowledge and worth (Buchowski 2004; Herzfeld 2005) that underpin this classic distinction between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ nationalism. Čarna Brković and Damián Martínez show in their articles in this issue how such a fear of this uncivilised version of nationalism lurks in the disciplinary distinction between East European ethnology and West European social anthropology.

Hence, I ask: what if the very issue here is the theory with which we think about the East? What if the East returns the gaze and asks what the histories, concepts and boundaries of the disciplinary vision are that create this unease (cf. Dzenovska 2018)? I brought such a disciplinary vision to the encounter with my friend (as I had been disciplined in it), but our embrace troubled this disciplinary/disciplined vision. This embodied episode resisted a quick categorisation.

As literary scholar Gabriel Josipovici (1996: 9) writes:

Sight is free and sight is irresponsible. I can cast my eye to the far horizon and then back to the fingers I hold up before my face, all in a fraction of a second and with no effort at all. And I can repeat the operation at will. On the other hand, were I to walk to that point on the horizon it would take time and effort, time and effort which I might feel I could better employ doing something else. To look costs me nothing but to go involves both a choice and a cost.

Josipovici is talking about embodiment here, about the kind of knowing of the world that is obtained through touch and through presence. In his book Touch (1996), he writes about the understanding that arises out of sharing the same world with another person, about knowing in one’s own body how something feels as the ground upon which one can recognise someone else’s action as meaningful. The distinction between sight and touch is a propitious way to think about the relationship between theory and ethnography, I wish to suggest. Ethnography of course operates on this exact principle – that it is through sharing the world that we get to understand. It can thus play a
key role in such theory (re-)work, as it provides a way of knowing and understanding that has the potential to challenge disciplinary boundaries, boundaries of vision that theory gives us. It is quick and easy, and does not cost much to label an expression, a gesture, a scarf with national symbols, as ‘ethnonationalist’. It is a move of the sight, of the vision, to the horizon and back with no effort. ‘Ethnonationalism’ is a pre-given category that evokes the more civilised ‘civic nationalism’ alongside it and as such reinstates the global hierarchy of worth (Herzfeld 2005). A move with the body, however, complicates analytical categories. It had to do with our embrace, and my sense of closeness to my friend, that this encounter resisted such an easy labelling.

In Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough, Wittgenstein (2010: 1e) writes, ‘Frazer’s account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as mistakes. Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the Confessions?’. A theory, an explanation that would treat the act of wearing the scarf as not sufficiently ‘European’ or not sufficiently ‘liberal’ would miss the point. Rather than explaining it as a matter of civilised West vs. uncivilised East, neutralised in the scientific language of civic vs. ethnic nationalism, we need to create space in contemporary social theory to think of nationalism as ‘not a moral mistake’ (Calhoun 2007: 1; see also Edensor 2002). The act of wearing the scarf is a way of being in the world that makes that world feel like home. As thousands of Latvians have emigrated as a result of two waves of neoliberal austerity, those who ‘have stayed’ draw on the symbols and the narratives of nationalism to mend the social ties and find some comfort. It becomes an ethical question, how to go on living and how to live well, in the face of social insecurity and precarity. Equally, I do not think it is particularly helpful to now simply ‘spot’ similar ‘ethnonationalism’ appearing in the West, in either the rhetoric of Brexit or Trump, or in the rise of radical right-wing parties in Italy, Greece or France, and seeing the East as the origin of this uncouth phenomenon.

Morality and social theory have often been treated apart; from Marx to the Frankfurt School, there is a rationalist bias in Western social theory (Seidler 1994). In social research, we often treat human life as a matter of forensic investigation, a whodunnit (Hage 2018). A typical social theoretical move is to expose and to unmask (Baehr 2019). Like Frazer does when exposing the primitives’ mistaken notions about the causes of rain. Wittgenstein (2010: 4e) brings us back to ourselves and how we, the moderns, also do something similar when we kiss a dear one’s photograph. Is it not similar as praying to a god for rain? Or
wearing a piece of clothing that carries a particular feeling of being at home, and being comforted by that feeling?

Recently, anthropologists have been looking for a new language to think about morality and ethics, one that goes beyond the post-structuralist and Marxist preoccupations with power and discourse. This means ‘taking seriously’ notions like freedom, responsibility and will (Laidlaw 2014). These are notions that we are used to treating in the post-structuralist tradition and neo-Marxist tradition as discursive nodes, as ideological traps (Ozoliņa 2019b). But they are also ethical notions that make life (more) liveable.

To conclude, while the debate on boundary making often suggests that East and West are part of the same global political economy and, at least potentially, the same ‘transnational’ European anthropology, I think it is also worthwhile to pay attention to the distinctness and locatedness of the East European perspective. The East can be theory-generating and enable us to question the existing hierarchies of knowledge (Buchowski 2004) and worth (Herzfeld 2005). Or, as observed by Francisco Martínez in his article in this issue, ‘Narva can be seen not just as an importer of models and policies, but also as a frontier of planning experiments and as an exporter of urban practices too, generating new political issues and anthropological objects of study’.

Instead of simply erasing the boundaries between East and West, I rather propose using the peripheral vision of the uncomfortable, not quite fitting, neither-first-world-nor-third-world Eastern Europe to challenge the stubborn boundary between morality and social theory and, relatedly, politics and ethics. The embodied nature of the ethnographic encounter in particular holds the power to open up established categories of thought. This can help develop theory that is directly in touch with the object of its gaze.

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