

Editorial: on the cheap

September 2003, while getting on a heavily overpopulated train from Cluj-Napoca to Blaj, Romania, there was not a single quiet compartment available. Or rather: there was only one such place, occupied by just a single young, pretty and overly sexy woman in her mid-twenties. As she sees me looking through the corridor window, she opens the door, asks in English where I am from, and then invites me into her strangely private space. As the train leaves the station she closes the curtains at the corridor side. A few minutes later the door and then the curtains are opened by the train conductor, a man in his fifties. He comes close to the young woman and points his finger at me. The woman apparently needs to explain who I am and why I am here.

There is a short exchange between the two of them and then the conductor departs with an irritated look on his face and without even checking our tickets. I am not supposed to be here and I invite the woman to clarify. She is “experienced”, she says. On her request, the conductor has allowed her to travel first class without a ticket in a reserved compartment, but in return she must allow him to “keep her companion” during the trip – curtains closed. But as she has started to dislike him, she asked me to come in. She has told the conductor that I, a foreigner who cannot read Romanian and has no idea about local customs, stepped into the compartment on my own account – which clearly finishes their deal. Having shared some of her secrets with me, and me having become a partner in her tricking out the conductor, we have somehow become friends now and before getting off the train she offers me her apartment for the night or for any other time I am around, giving me her phone number.

Fuzzy boundaries between commercial sex work and intimate relationships, between

prostitution and non-illicit forms of work, as well as between transmigration and tourism by women in post-socialist contexts are the fascinating subject of Hülya Demirdirek’s and Judy Whitehead’s special section in this issue of *Focaal*. The guest editors have an agnostic take to the increasing number of prostitutes from Eastern European countries in Western European cities. The West, they argue, is only willing to frame the spread of sex work in two ways: either its practitioners are innocent young victims of fraud and violence who must be liberated and helped; or, if they are conscious and intentional actors without regret, they are criminals; a discursive split that resembles earlier Victorian moral imaginations. This discourse serves to hide from view the overriding fact that the West has not been gracious enough to allow these societies anything else than a squarely neo-liberal transition which has helped to destroy multiple social rights and meaningful employment opportunities in the more peripheral zones of East and Central Europe.

Offering the body in all sorts of ways has become one of the weapons of the weak among females who have often been more deeply victimized by neo-liberal transition than men – offering the body for a Western male public that has been fed on erotic imaginations since the commercialization of TV, the boom in sexual media content and the spread of the nearly porno-driven Internet – another Western silence. Fuzzy sex work has become a way to participate against the odds in fantasies of a world of consumption, including erotic consumption, which has turned out to be the most tangible item among all the abstract ‘goods’ – democracy, rule of law, civil society, general prosperity – the West proudly had on offer for post-socialist citizens as well as its own. Going beyond the predictable headlines of the news – while not

at all denying the degrading and criminal contexts that have emerged – this theme section takes a more realistic view of fuzzy sex work as one strategy amid others to create individual openings for post-socialist women where public structures are at best of little help and often a hard obstacle to take.

This issue does some additional work in scrutinizing the socialist and post-socialist condition – our contribution to the celebrations of EU-accession time. Kacper Pobłocki shows how and why the Pope came to rescue the Polish post-communists/social democrats in their desperate effort to get voters tired of neo-liberal transition behind Poland's bid for EU accession; and why the Pope needed the Polish Left after the Right had started to capitalize on 'transition fatigue' and threatened to reject EU membership. Katherine Verdery offers an enjoyable retrospective critique of ideology by narrating her encounters with the supposedly totalitarian communist state in Romania in the 1970s and 1980s. She did not notice it then and she confides she absorbed too much Cold War propaganda, but what she encountered was very fuzzy totalitarianism and state control indeed. Verdery and Pobłocki agree that neither the "success of transition" nor the actual mind-control of the erstwhile communist parties are what they pretend to be.

Eastern European transition has been a transition on the cheap throughout. A mere 10 per cent of the amount that was paid out per citizen to the two times more wealthy Iberian societies in the 1980s is now going to be disbursed by the EU to Central Europe. The hegemony of the market leaves little generosity and curtails the belief in public projects. The West sends its software – the images of consumption and the ideologies of civil society, good governance, democracy and progress through global capitalism – but refuses to facilitate investments in the hardware. A fascinating contrast to the frantic public-private building projects in the globalizing West, such as the miracle Oresund bridge between Denmark and Sweden analyzed as a cultural drama by Orvar Löfgren

in this issue. Here is an exemplary Western case heavily prepared through dream-work by advertising firms announcing the beginning of a new borderless European era. Disillusions all the same, but not because, as in the East, there was no bridge after all: concrete transnationalism must be less shiny than its profit-driven imagineering had painted it as it slowly begins to embed itself into the everyday routines of some Danes and Swedes.

Hegemony: does it exist if Eastern Europeans do not buy elite transition fantasies, socialist bureaucrats pursue projects of their own and Nordics become tired of dream-marketing? Gavin Smith offers us pertinent thoughts on anthropology and hegemony since Gramsci and argues that the critical project is about power and material social relationships rather than about fixing culture in the idealist sense. Applied to our cases, hegemony is the public inability under neo-liberal global circumstances to envision generosity and long-term self interest on the part of Western actors in relation to post-socialism; it is also the transformation of selves and bodies into commodities or tools for negotiation and connectivity as the self evident outcome of the experience of 'accession on the cheap'; or the shallow moral imagination and scapegoating of the Western European bourgeoisies who criminalize Eastern European female 'sexession' (or s'accession?) strategies while ignoring their own sex-saturated and porno-inspired privatized media consumption. Not less on the cheap: the public sphere in the contemporary West.

Peter Skalník, finally, discusses the return of the chieftom as centralized bureaucracies of states and corporations give way to hybrid and opaque formations organized around male power brokers. The chieftom thus not anymore as just the precursor to the modern state but as what comes after, from the Congo and Sierra Leone to post-socialist state fragmentations, Enron, Al Qaeda and the Republican Party. Inherent consequences of a hegemony on the cheap? Skalník seems more optimistic.

– Don Kalb