
Constructing a new understanding of the environment under postsocialism

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Abstract. This paper introduces a special grouping of papers on the theme of the environment and postsocialism. After the collapse of state socialism in Europe between 1989 and 1991, many immediate approaches to environmental reconstruction assumed that economic liberalisation and democratisation would alleviate problems. Since then, critics have argued that these proposed solutions were themselves problematic, and too closely reflected Western European and North American conceptions of environmental quality and democracy. The result has been a counterreaction focusing on detail and specificity at national levels and below. In this paper, we summarise debates about the environment and postsocialism since the period 1989–91. In particular, we examine whether an essentialistic link can be made between state socialism and environmental problems, and how far civil society—or environmentalism—may result in an improvement in perceived environmental quality. Finally, we consider the possibility for developing an approach to the environment and postsocialism that lies between crude generalisation and microscale studies.

1 Introduction

This paper introduces a special grouping of work on the theme of the environment and postsocialism from the Post-socialist Geographies Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). Our aim in this first paper is to summarise recent debates concerning the environment and postsocialism, and then to outline key issues for the construction of new and locally determined forms of environmental governance. The following papers by Adam Fagin and Caedmon Staddon illustrate these issues by discussing individual cases of environmental policy under postsocialism.

It has long been acknowledged that many official responses to postsocialism have been inspired more by Western frameworks than by the wishes and concerns of local populations (for example, Dunford, 1998; Jancar-Webster, 1998). In 1992, Michalak and Gibb (1992, page 342) wrote that academic debates in political geography were flawed in relation to postsocialism because they were “using frameworks designed to deal with the capitalist state in the context of a western-style parliamentary democracy”. Adopting Western-style methods and solutions to postsocialist problems—and defining these problems in terms of the West—resulted only in compounding the already serious challenges of postsocialism by failing to acknowledge the diversity and specificity of different postsocialist societies.

Such comments may also be made in relation to environmental problems under postsocialism. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1990, much environmental attention was absorbed by catastrophic images such as Chernobyl (Mirovitskaya, 1998), the polluted Aral Sea, discarded plutonium mines (Müller et al, 1998), and decaying nuclear submarines. Many authors portrayed these as ideological failures

resulting directly from state socialism. In 1994, Parysek and Dutkowski wrote:

“[Under the socialist state] the principle of primacy of ideology over politics, politics over the economy, and the economy over social problems, has left behind legacies of an incapable, inefficient, technologically backward and pathological economic system; an incapacitated, collectivised and cowed society lacking initiative and deprived of any influence on its own fate; and over-exploited, devastated and degraded environment” (page 424).

Yet, even then, such a direct link between state socialism and environmental degradation was being questioned. In 1991, Peter Pithart, a Czech government official, was quoted as saying:

“We [in Czechoslovakia] did not get into this environmental mess only because the Communists suffered excessively from a growth mentality. The West is little different on that score. The planned economy led to some awful distortions, but it did not invent unsustainable forestry, chemical agriculture, crowded cities, traffic jams, or industrial smog” (quoted in *Audubon* January 1991; in Rodes and Odell, 1992, page 62).

In this paper, we question the proposed link between postsocialist transition and the environment. We summarise the various debates about the environment under postsocialism since the collapse of state socialism in Europe between 1989 and 1991, and seek to identify new, more flexible approaches to the subject. In particular, we question whether an essentialistic link can be made between postsocialism and either environmental problems or proposed solutions to environmental problems. Yet, rather than dismissing any link at all, or replacing crude generalisations with an approach that supports only microscale place studies, we also consider how far researchers can combine a generalised approach to postsocialism with an approach that acknowledges local needs and concerns (see also Pavlinek and Pickles, 2000; Smith and Pickles, 1998).

The paper is divided into three main sections. First, we paint a picture of approaches to the environment under postsocialism immediately following the collapse of European state socialism. We have based this section upon policy actions and academic texts of the time, and we seek to demonstrate the essentialistic link made between the perceived failings of socialist government and what was then considered to be environmental degradation. Second, we summarise criticisms of these approaches that have emerged within the last decade. In particular, this section considers the role of civil society both before and after the collapse of state socialism, and the extent to which environmental activism has led to better informed, more responsive environmental policy. Third, we discuss the implications of these criticisms for environmental governance under postsocialism, and the prospects for a locally determined, yet politically effective, form of policy.

2 Setting the scene: market triumphalism and global environmentalism in 1990

It was easy to be critical of socialism in the early 1990s. The revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989, the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1990, and the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 came at a time of neoliberal hegemony in Europe and North America. Much of the West had enjoyed years of economic growth under the pro-market leadership of Reagan, Thatcher, and Kohl—the so-called “age of market triumphalism” (Peet and Watts, 1993). Meanwhile, President Reagan’s rhetoric of “the evil empire” in relation to the Soviet Union during the Cold War added further righteousness to differences between East and West. When state socialism collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991, what followed was rightly described as the “victory of the one alternative” (Jancar-Webster, 1998). The Western ‘model’ of market democracy became the prescribed solution to the countries undergoing

postsocialist transition, even though it was already clear that there were great diversity and problems within this so-called model. Furthermore, the collapse of state socialism could be attributed to a wide variety of causes, both inside and outside Central and Eastern Europe, and not simply to the errors of economic management.

The debate about the environment and postsocialism also reflected the conflicts between East and West. The undoubted environmental catastrophes of the Soviet Union at Chernobyl, at the Aral Sea, and at its many plutonium mines and major industrial zones were seen as examples of uncaring state-socialist bureaucracy, yet also were redolent of Cold War apocalyptic rhetoric (Feshbach, 1995; Medvedev, 1992). Moreover, the governments of Central and Eastern Europe approached environmental issues from the viewpoint of security, or as threats to the state, and thus did not debate them with private citizens (Heinisch, 1992).

Under the centrally planned economies of state socialism, achieving set increases in production was the key way to measure economic progress and was considered more important than 'temporary' negative environmental impacts (Waller and Millard, 1992). Against the "fixation on economic development above everything else" (Jancar-Webster, 1998, page 77) of state socialism, environmental concerns were of little immediate value as the costs of degradation could be hidden or denied officially, and concerns could be postponed to a later five-year plan, whereas immediate economic development could be claimed politically as an achievement. With no profits to be made from environmental degradation by individual industrialists, it was commonly argued that, in the interest of all society, "socialism could afford to be a little bit dirtier" (Boehmer-Christiansen, 1998, page 72). Indeed, under a system in which all resources were placed in public ownership, pollution could not be defined in terms of the private sector offloading costs onto the public sector, as it has been defined in capitalist societies (Goldman, 1992). Although, clearly, some concern about pollution did lead to the voicing of discontent by some social groups, the amount of possible debate allowed in the public domain was, of course, radically less than in Western Europe or North America.

As a result of concerns about such issues, academic approaches within Europe and North America to the environmental problems of socialist states in the early 1990s tended to be influenced by general critiques of Marxism–Leninism as an economic and political system, vis-à-vis the seeming superiority of the Western market system. Two key themes can be identified in the criticisms: an approach focusing on economic management and the internalisation of environmental costs; and the focus on the role of social activism and civil society in creating an equitable and effective environmental policy.

According to the economic approaches, the key errors lay in the inefficiencies of the state as a body to conduct rational and nonwasteful allocation of resources (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998; Moe and Tangen, 2000). This principle was adopted in critiques from the contemporaneously growing discipline of environmental economics in the early 1990s (Osaghae, 1994; Payne, 1995). Pollution (or resource depletion) was approached as an economic externality reflecting the failure of current pricing systems or reflecting the negative impacts of subsidies afforded to local producers or state bureaucrats (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998; DeBardeleben, 1985). Increasing market forces, and simultaneously decreasing the ineffective state mechanisms and subsidies that interfered with market forces, were therefore proposed as ways to use resources more efficiently, and to reduce pollution. Effectively, the underlying notion was that effective allocation of resources per se would result in environmental benefits. Drawing on Bulgarian experience, for instance, Psychev (1992, page 13) wrote that "legislative and institutional transition from a centralised and controlled economy to [a] market

economy” was the first necessary change required in order to tackle “the severely damaged environment inherited from the centrally controlled economy”.

In the political debates, critics focused on the suppression of environmental activism and civil society in general as a cause of ineffective environmental policy. In particular, the criticism of state socialism for suppressing environmental activism came at a time when public activism in the West on environmental issues was becoming more strident, and also increasingly focused on ‘global’ environmental impacts. As Welsh and Tickle (1998, page 1) noted, “the 1989 revolutions coincided with a marked ‘global turn’ in environmental politics”. Initially, socialist governments resisted international environmental pressure, yet under perestroika and glasnost there was a growing willingness to cooperate on international environmental matters (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998; Goldman, 1992). In 1989, for example, the CSCE (Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe) environmental conference was held in Sofia (Nikitina, 1992; Waller and Millard, 1992). Local environmental groups within socialist countries also grew in number. Yet the influence of such groups on environmental policy has been strongly contested, as discussed in section 3.

Environmental problems under postsocialism in 1990 were therefore considered among Western analysts and activists to be largely a function of state socialist economics, with the political suppression of environmentalism as a regulating force. Yet, although it is important to acknowledge the influence of state socialism on environmental problems, many environmental hazards in the East were still intricately combined with interactions with the West. During the latter half of the 1980s, for example, West Germany paid hard currency to East Germany to import industrial waste for treatment or storage in disused mines. Such treatment would have been costly or politically unpopular in West Germany. Yet West German politicians still continued to attack East Germany for allowing transboundary pollutants such as acid rain and discharges into rivers (Hillenbrand, 1996).

This contradiction reflects the generally poorly developed state of international environmental negotiation at the time. The problems of international pollution had been acknowledged in the 1984 Munich Conference on Transboundary Air Pollution, at which West German environmental groups campaigned widely against the perceived pollution ‘across the border’ (Kabala, 1993). Yet the first bilateral environmental agreement between East and West Germany was signed only in 1987, and the shared nature of many environmental problems was acknowledged only in 1990. The debate in the early 1990s about state socialism, and its relationship with the environment, was therefore also restricted by the general evolution of international environmental debate at the time, and by the wide disparity between the concerns of the public, the campaigns of environmental activists, and the ability of governments to implement policies quickly through effective mechanisms or international agreement (Young, 1997).

3 Acknowledging complexity: postsocialism and the environment in 2000

If the 1990 debates about postsocialism were characterised by criticisms of socialist economies and political management, then discussions since 1990 have shifted to acknowledging the errors within the proposed solutions. Four key themes have been identified in relation to conventional approaches to postsocialist transition. First, the inherent focus of proposed solutions on economic liberalisation and democratisation have been criticised for overlooking what these terms might mean, and how they may be implemented in postsocialist societies and economies (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998; Frankland and Cox, 1995). Second, postsocialist countries have been acknowledged to be highly varied and complex, with specific paths of transition emerging as a reflection of place specificity (Bradshaw et al, 1998; Dostal, 1998; Herrschel, 1999;

Stark, 1992; Vari and Tarnas, 1993; Widmaier and Potatz, 1999). Third, the term 'transition', as commonly used to describe postsocialism (Clague, 1992; Clague and Rausser, 1992), has been criticised for implying a teleological journey from state socialism to democratic capitalism without acknowledging alternative pathways, or the problems of democratic capitalism itself. Indeed, the terms 'East' and 'West' have also been criticised for suggesting a uniformity and predictability, that may never have existed, among the capitalist countries and among the postsocialist countries. Such words also overlook the obvious differences relating to non-European postsocialist states (Hann, 1992; Offe, 1994; Pickvance, 2000; Weigle and Butterfield, 1992). A fourth concern—discussed later in this paper—is the changed understanding of the environment and environmental change, and the role of social activism in communicating and establishing particular concerns above others.

There have been several criticisms of economic liberalisation as a form of environmental reform. From experience to date, it is clear that the more efficient allocation of resources resulting from freer markets has not been reached, or that market distortions and inequities still exist (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998; Eckersley, 1992; Smith, 1996). In eastern Germany, for example, foreign investment has not resulted in a more socially equitable form of development, but instead in the purchase and rationalisation of the more attractive investment opportunities by outsiders. The result has been a spatially very selective investment and resulting distribution of benefits to society. In other countries, inflation, rapid economic decline, and a shortage of basic goods have also affected economic recovery. As Fforde and de Vylder (1996, page 312) wrote in relation to Vietnam,

“whereas inflation, eroding central authority, and even corruption may have been ‘creatively destructive’ during the transitional phase, the same phenomena are today merely destructive.”

Such problems have furthered the questioning of the so-called ‘Washington consensus’ of the early 1990s, which was adopted by international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Foundation for managing national economic strategies through neoliberal principles of financial liberalisation (Welsh, 1994). Instead, theorists are quicker to acknowledge the role of the state in facilitating investment and maintaining regulation, rather than making a simple distinction between state and market (Tickle and Welsh, 1998; van Brabant, 1992). Baker and Jehlicka (1998, page 25) point strongly to the failure of the Eastern and Central European countries to adopt a more proactive stance in transition, especially regarding environmental issues:

“This [tackling of environmental issues] has meant a failure on behalf of ECE countries to realise a more far-reaching and ultimately more rewarding approach towards the management of transition ...”

Concerning democratisation, the formation and influence of civil society have also been problematised for failing to produce an effective greater inclusivity of society in the political process (for example, Kornai, 1992; Rau, 1991). Research into postsocialist civil society in general has indicated that, despite the rise of social movements and new political organisations under postsocialism, preexisting élites or state members continue to be powerful in politics despite the collapse of the socialist state per se (Lewis, 1997; Welsh, 1994). Furthermore, the emergence of new political voices does not necessarily imply an increased representation for previously marginalised groups such as some women, ethnic minorities, or transient workers (Spierling, 1999). As a result, critics have argued that the long hoped-for emergence of social capital under postsocialism has been countered by the persistence of so-called ‘political capital’, or the continued possession of power by established élites. As an example, the emergence of a new business class from within the state or Communist Party in

Russia has been described as a new ‘Nomenklatura capitalism’—or ‘capitalists without capitalism’—because the new business class has political capital without inducing economic development, and also may engage in corrupt business activities or selfish ‘property grabs’ (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998, page 5). However, in Eastern and Central Europe, the dependency of economic growth on a managerial class outside the existing state has been claimed to produce a more dynamic and equitable ‘capitalism without capitalists’ (Eyal et al, 1997).

Such difficulties in achieving effective democratisation, and the persistence of old élites, have affected the ways in which environmentalists may influence policy. In an analysis of the Czech Republic, Slocock (1996) described four factors that led to the continued importance of the central state in environmental policy. First, pressure-group politics are poorly developed, and hence industrial lobbies have been unable to oppose new environmental legislation. Second, compact environmental-policy networks within government have enabled legislators to develop and enforce new guidelines quickly. Third, the dynamics of competition within coalition governments have resulted in environmental policy being made a priority. Fourth, international pressure has made it necessary for the Czech state to enforce environmental protection in order to gain international legitimacy. As a result, the Czech Republic has often been used as an example, in Western eyes, of successful integration of local environmentalism, state response, and international regulation (also see following paper by Fagin).

However, elsewhere in Europe, the relationship of environmental activism to other forms of social unrest has been more complicated, with signs of proliferation and marginalisation, and occasionally with tensions emerging between environmentalism and other political themes, such as nationalism, when it comes to cooperation for political expediency (Jancar-Webster, 1998; Waller and Millard, 1992). In the Romanian city of Giurgiu in the 1980s, for example, environmentalism was associated with nationalism when local complaints about sulphur emissions from factories in the neighbouring Bulgarian town of Ruse gained extra political impetus because they were linked to criticism of Bulgaria (Botcheva, 1998). In this case, nationalism was an impetus to environmental objectives, thus forming an effective discourse coalition of different political interests, and a consequent improvement in the political potency of both political sentiments (Hajer, 1995). However, in Slovakia in the early 1990s, nationalism proved a source of dissent in environmental movements, thus significantly weakening the initial aims of the environmentalists (see also Pavlinek and Pickles, 2000, pages 186–189; Podoba, 1998; Snajdr, 1998).

Perhaps most importantly, environmentalism often arose under state socialism because it was the only form of public protest allowed, and citizens also used it to express the suppression of public debate and personal values under socialism (Boehmer-Christiansen, 1998; Yanitsky, 1991; 1996). However, this did not lead to an immediate decline in environmental objectives in political debate after the collapse of socialism. In Czechoslovakia, for example, the government gave environmental concerns a high priority in its new agenda. Furthermore, evidence from elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe indicates that local environmentalism both grew and diversified greatly after 1990 (Pavlinek and Pickles, 2000). Yet, at the same time, the changes in policy resulting from the initial environmental euphoria became less uniform and established, and the effects became more diversified and indirect. Many environmental activists—successful in environmental activism under socialism—quickly joined mainstream politics, leaving behind politically less versatile groupings (Waller and Millard, 1992). Added to this, much of the impetus for environmentalism changed from originating from state-dominated ventures to coming from independent and local campaigns. This led inevitably to a fragmentation of initiatives and policies, weakening their perceived relevance at the

national level as populations increasingly focused on pursuing a Western lifestyle (Janca-Webster, 1998).

But importantly too, the political context of environmentalism became far more complex, and linked to a number of campaigns and objectives at local, national, and international levels. In some locations, the environmental improvement that occurred during postsocialism became part of the authorities' attempt to encourage more investment and to enhance the reputations of particular regions. In northern Bohemia, for example, the government of the Czech Republic now market the environmental renovation of old coal-mining areas as a key factor in economic recovery (Herrschel, 2001). But although there are examples of governments actively enacting environmental improvement, some critics have claimed that the emerging form of environmentalism in Central and Eastern Europe is also influenced by East–West advocacy coalitions that may not effectively represent local views and concerns inside postsocialist countries. In Germany, for example, the west German Green Party absorbed the east German opposition movement *Bündnis 90* (Association 90) on the assumption that each would share views about environment and would jointly represent a broader power base. Former activists under socialism are now part of a party machinery embedded in west German politics and participate in west German elections (such as in the *Land* of North-Rhine Westphalia on 14 May 2000—*Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* newspaper 15 May 2000). They are thus no longer acting as representatives of east German grassroots civil society. In addition, the prospect of EU membership, as well as 'green conditionality' attached to financial loans by international agencies, such as the EU through its Phare programme, and the World Bank, have enhanced a Western environmental agenda. As Janca-Webster (1998, page 75) observed:

“Aid to the ECE was the first in the world to be required to have an environmental component.”

Yet what is at stake here is not just the influence of different actors upon the achievement of environmental reconstruction, but also the political process by which environmental problems are constructed. The environmentalism in North America and Western Europe since the 1960s has been typified as a 'new' social movement, characteristic of postindustrial or postmaterialist societies (for example, Welsh and Tickle, 1998, page 20). In Central and Eastern Europe, however, the societal conditions for social-movement formation are different, and are complicated by the establishment of environmentalism as a preexisting political force in the capitalist West. Waller and Millard (1992, page 171) wrote:

“Eastern Europe as yet provides neither the social base nor the social conditions for the 'post-materialist' society.”

This difference between environmentalism as a political force in different societies has also been noted in relation to non-European countries experiencing market reform under socialism or postsocialism. Indeed, the combination of rapid industrial growth with the continued existence of socialist states or communist parties (as in China and Vietnam) has illustrated a variety of key differences between the Asian and European experiences of postsocialism. In China, for example, the weakening of the state has not necessarily implied a strengthening of society per se, but there has been a growth in the importance of alliances between local state institutions and local entrepreneurs (Wank, 1995; White et al, 1996). These alliances present a link between economic and social forms of civil society, in favour of local control over resources and over industrialisation, rather than being just a critique of state and industry alone (Urry, 1981). Indeed, the emphasis of environmentalism in Western Europe and North America as a 'new' social movement, supposedly characteristic of postindustrial society, and seeking a remedy to the instrumental reason of an industrial technocratic society, may not easily

be transferred to countries currently undergoing industrialisation as well as transition (Yanitsky, 1993). Indeed, some researchers have suggested that postsocialist transition (or increasing economic liberalisation) in developing countries needs to be seen as the increasing linking of local industrialists and local state structures, as critics of the central state, rather than being seen as the abolition of the state altogether, or the separation of supposed local interests from the interests of entrepreneurs. Wank (1995, page 75) wrote:

“it is the power of the local bureaucracy [in China] that is most enhanced by the emergence of private capitalist business. Through discretionary control over regulatory levers, officials can extract an income from private enterprises thereby reducing their financial dependence on the central state. The emergence of ‘autonomy’ in the overall political configuration, therefore, is less the growing autonomy of society vis-a-vis the state, but rather the heightened autonomy of locales comprised of alliances between local state and society actors vis-a-vis the central state.”

Adger (2000, page 755) noted that

“the continued dominance of state institutions in numerous aspects of resource allocation is a key determinant of collective security and vulnerability in Vietnam ... the political recasting of some of the organs of administrative power does not necessarily lead to greater local participation and collective empowerment.”

Approaches to postsocialist reconstruction that readily define economic liberalisation and democratisation in the form of ‘civil society’ may therefore avoid the great complexity contained within these terms, and they also fail to acknowledge the ways the terms may reflect Western European or North American experiences and values. In environmental terms this may be particularly seen in relation to the construction of environmentalism from the experiences of postindustrial societies in North America and Western Europe, rather than from the experiences of the environment and resources in transitional or developing countries. In effect, this may mean that local environmental concerns in developing and transitional countries focus more on the desire to participate equitably in industrialisation and resource exploitation than on adopting the environmental values and objectives of Western environmentalists (Forsyth, 1997; McElroy et al, 1998).

The different construction of environmental objectives and quality between different societies illustrates a wider set of changes that have occurred in debates about the environment in general since the early 1990s. For example, ‘nonequilibrium’ forms of ecosystems analysis are becoming increasingly popular as an alternative to previous explanations that tended to portray the environment in natural balance (for example, Botkin, 1990). Similarly, other researchers have argued for local participation and briefing in environmental scientific explanation in order to gain locally relevant management tools and acceptance of proposed policies (Cohen et al, 1998). These new approaches to environmental understanding have implications for the role of civil society in the definition and communication of environmental problems. The encouragement of advocacy coalitions between East and West, or the belief that adherence to international environmental codes may result in effective environmental policy (as proposed by Haas, 1994; Wapner, 1995), overlook the extent to which such alliances or codes may not reflect local environmental needs and concerns. It is clear that many initial assumptions about environmental degradation under postsocialism were based upon preexisting notions of the environment from Western societies rather than upon local debates (see following paper by Staddon).

Such different constructions of environmental objectives are illustrated in some of the most currently negotiated aspects of environmental policy in postsocialist countries.

Under the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, for example, the establishment of an emissions trading system as one way to achieve reductions in greenhouse gas emissions was criticised for using estimates of industrial emissions dating from 1990. According to one estimate, Russia and the Ukraine are currently emitting at 30% below 1990 levels as a result of industrial decline (Grubb et al, 1999, page 216). Using 1990 levels as a base for calculations may therefore result in no overall reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases as these postsocialist countries may be able to sell permits for reductions in emissions that would have occurred anyway (the so-called 'hot air' problem). Similarly, under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), also created by the Kyoto Protocol, industrialised countries with targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Annex I countries) may do so partly by investing in climate-friendly activities in non-Annex I (usually developing) countries. The controversiality of this approach became obvious in the failed EU–US negotiations on the EU summit in Nice in December 2000 (*The Independent* 15 December 2000). Yet, to date, the CDM evaluates projects only according to their impact on greenhouse gas concentrations, and therefore differing projects such as forest plantations or renewable energy investment are seen equally in the eyes of the Kyoto Protocol if they impact equally on greenhouse gases, regardless of how each strategy may impact on local development or local environmental concerns (Forsyth, 1999). A similar uniformity of approach can be seen in the fact that Central European countries awaiting accession into the EU will have to comply with general EU-defined environmental standards which they will have had no ability to influence (Altmann, 1996).

The implications of these debates are that extending preconceived ideas about environmental quality and practice to postsocialist countries may in fact impose values and solutions upon societies that may not agree with them. Yet, although it is important to acknowledge potential clashes of values between (and within) postsocialist societies and outside experts and activists, implementing any environmental policy also depends on building an effective, and inclusive, political infrastructure. In many postsocialist countries, official data on environmental performance are unreliable (Altshuler et al, 1992, page 204). And the evolution of local governance in the wake of state socialism is, of course, difficult, and requires further steps.

4 Constructing a new understanding of the environment under postsocialism

In this paper we have argued for a new understanding of the environment under postsocialism, one decade on from the dramatic fall of the Iron Curtain. The years immediately following the collapse of state socialism in Eastern and Central Europe were dominated by simplistic and generalising interpolations from Western experience labelled as the leading, 'victorious' societal-economic paradigm. Few attempts were made to appreciate different, and more local, approaches to the 'environment' in the former socialist societies.

Yet when the oversimplicity of initial approaches became evident in the wake of a better understanding of the nature and diversity of postsocialist change and societal-economic processes, the academic debate responded by emphasising diversity, individuality, and small-scale geography in postsocialist analyses. There are thus signs that two diametrically opposed understandings are emerging of the environment under postsocialism. We argue that these contrasting approaches should not be seen as two competing, mutually exclusive, and contradictory understandings, but rather more like the endpoints of a scale between which to position the starting point for 'appropriate' research of the complex nature of the environment under postsocialism. At one end of the scale is a clear emphasis on the *general* contrast between Western and postsocialist countries and their relationship to the 'environment'. At the other end is a distinct

focus on the *individual* differences that emerged between these countries in response to specific historic-political, institutional, and cultural factors. Fundamental in this scale is the appreciation that the two key elements commonly used to define state socialism—central economic planning and suppression of civil society—are themselves perceived from societies where ‘free markets’ and ‘democratisation’ have their own contextualisation, and that it is dangerous to project these concepts uncritically to postsocialist countries as potential solutions to specific problems.

Constructing a new understanding of the environment under postsocialism, we argue, lies in reassessing the original reasoning that led to the initial assumptions of postsocialist development and, subsequently, to the uniform approaches to its explanation and interpretation, while *simultaneously* addressing specific variations in representing, and responding to, environmental issues in postsocialist countries. This includes the role of the environmental movement as the perceived instigator of the overthrow of the state-socialist regimes, and also the simplistic portrayal of environmental degradation as endemic to state socialism to a degree where popular fear of an environmental catastrophe was greater than that of oppressive state power.

Furthermore, the generalised and often naïve transfer to postsocialist conditions of inferences on environmental issues and movements gained from Western experiences included assumptions about the similarity in aims and political affiliations of those groups that acquired a particular interest in environmental issues both in Western and in Eastern and Central Europe. It is important to note that there were, however, distinct differences. The environmental movement in the West grew in strength and political acceptance as a result of the new social movements of the 1960s, and challenged the established market democracies from an ‘alternative’, intellectual, and often neo-Marxist point of view (despite the fact that many groups had existed long before this period). The movements under state socialism had a shorter tradition, and came from a rejection of ‘actually existing’ Marxism–Leninism. Thus, in these groups, especially in the early 1990s, there was little love lost for left-leaning sentiments (McKay, 2000). Environmental concerns at the end of state socialism were the rallying point to challenge and overthrow Marxism–Leninism, not to follow it in a new, ‘sanitised’, and ‘intellectualised’ format. It is this difference which so easily can be ignored and neglected when simply looking, usually from a Western perspective, at the seemingly obvious common denominator of ‘environmental concern’. It is important to respond to the distinct differences in the ways these groups emerged and established their legitimacy as popular challengers to the socialist state system. Again, the socialist experience provided the common root, but different democratic ‘growth’ sprang from it.

The simplistic conclusion was derived from the very understanding of ‘postsocialism’ as a synonym for ‘new market liberalism’, towards which the ‘transition’ process would lead by default, including dealings with ‘environment’. In reality, however, the environmental movements pursued quite different political affiliations from their Western (notional) counterparts, usually out of political expediency to secure their viability. Linking up with nationalist groups, as in Slovenia, for instance, would seem completely beyond the ideologically tolerable in Western environmentalist circles. This reflects the quite different understanding of ‘environment’ vis-à-vis liberal capitalism in the West, in contrast to it being a more coopted, ‘integral part’ of those market processes which are developing under postsocialism. Thus, in the Western understanding, ‘environmental’ and ‘left-wing’ policies are usually an ideological pair, as are ‘right-wing’ and ‘free market’. Under postsocialism, these paradigmatic pairings are less obvious and are subject to much greater variation. The ‘environment’ is much less clearly associated with a particular political leaning, nor is there a (dogmatic)

confrontational stance towards 'market'. Instead, 'environment' is currently little more than a separate niche within the dominant paradigm of the market economy, with left-wing political agendas considered in most postsocialist countries to be very suspect.

The presumed uniformity inevitably ignored the fundamental effects of postsocialism on the societal underpinnings in terms of experiences, values, and priorities of the former state-socialist societies in comparison with those of the West, and ignored also the diverse and individual variations between postsocialist countries and even regions and localities. It is this dual quality of 'differential commonality' of postsocialist development which refers to the contested and constructed understandings of the nature of the environment and environmental problems under postsocialism. It is only now, after a decade of experience and learning, that this complexity is becoming clearer and is making its way into the political and academic debate, producing a more sensitive and appropriate analysis of postsocialist environmentalism. The issue now, however, is to not 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' and focus entirely on difference and individuality. Postsocialism as such is a very unique societal condition which needs to be acknowledged for its common characteristics and implications for future development in the relevant countries.

Achieving a new understanding of the environment under postsocialism thus depends most crucially on the construction of local capacity for political debate and self-determination. In this sense, creating 'environmental capacity' implies creating the space for local determination of environmental objectives rather than simply equipping localities with technical expertise to implement objectives identified elsewhere. Such local capacity is illustrated in the following paper. Fagin discusses the inclusivity of public environmental debate in the Czech Republic as a definition of capacity for reform. Staddon discusses the integration of historic forest-management practices into new strategies for forest products in Bulgaria.

Yet the construction of local environmental democracy is still far from complete, made difficult by the immediate challenges of day-to-day life under postsocialism. There is a continued role for the state (and international advocates, such as the EU) in providing space for such discussion and in maintaining scope for emancipating democratic adoption of these issues. Any state-political arrangement would thus have to incorporate the outcomes of a required continued learning processes, and so the growing assertiveness of democratic will. Environmental objectives will therefore need to be increasingly defined 'from within' rather than from outside postsocialist societies.

These changes have to be acknowledged by analytical approaches to the role of 'environmentalism' under postsocialism. The result is a degree of diversity that is unlikely to be encapsulated in a single explanatory framework, but will encourage a variety of interpretations. It is important, however, that these acknowledge their common grounding in the particular characteristics of postsocialism as an experiential framework of the development in formerly socialist countries. Otherwise, the result may be an atomisation of arguments, obscuring the commonality of postsocialist experiences, while stressing minutiae in difference and specificity. Although in this paper we have acknowledged the deconstruction of environmental discourse and the need for discursive democracy, we also wish to avoid the more fissiparous effects of "the syndrome of post-modernism" observed in academic debate on and analysis of Western societies (Padgett, 1999, page 18). Postsocialist characteristics, by contrast, may offer some common direction.

The argument here is that, after the collapse of state socialism, a more locally nuanced, yet distinctly 'postsocialist' environmentalism needs to be established, involving greater scope for the local determination of environmental and developmental objectives

in response to the *particular* place-specific experiences, expertise, and ambitions, as shaped under postsocialism. This may be more akin to the socially responsible capitalism or 'Third Way' public-private synergies attempted in varying forms by Blair, Clinton, and Schröder. We argue that such a locally nuanced form of environmental management is crucial to the construction of a new understanding of the environment under the common, and still very present, experience of postsocialism. The individuality within postsocialist commonality needs to be accepted by existing dominant Western theoretical explanations and paradigms. Constructing a new understanding of the environment under postsocialism does not always mean rejecting the concepts and values of other countries and societies. But it does imply amending our thoughts and proposals to acknowledge the differences between our experiences and the needs of postsocialist countries, and also to allow for local determination both in identifying problems and in receiving proposed solutions.

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