Trans-national approaches to locally situated concerns: Exploring the meanings of post-socialist space

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Introduction: Creating space for a critical discussion of post-socialist societies

This collection of essays is based on the outcomes of an ESRC seminar series 'Trans-national Issues, Local Concerns: Insights from Russia, CEE and the UK' (RES-451-26-0007), which ran from October 2003 to October 2004 and comprised five individual workshops and seminars.[1] The underlying aim of the seminar series as a whole was to contribute to current understandings of societal change in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Russia. This was pursued via an exploration of existing categories associated with notions of societal transition and transformation, and furthered through the establishment of a trans-national dialogue among academics, policymakers and practitioners from the UK, CEE and Russia.

The initial idea for the seminar series was stimulated by two broad areas of debate that have emerged from a range of disciplines and that are concerned with the explicatory capacities of existing conceptual frameworks related to processes of change occurring in the post-socialist region. The first of these is grounded on the evident disjuncture between the generalizing and normalizing tendencies of 'transition theory' and the corresponding experiences of academics as they encounter communities and their realities within CEE and Russia.[2] Such experiences encourage, among other things, reflection on the ambiguities of contemporary trends, which are evident at the local level and relate to the day-to-day activities of individuals, households and communities, as they negotiate the complexities of deep-seated societal change. Connected with this is continued interest in efforts to move away from a tendency to prioritize Western experience in favour of a more open engagement with the dynamics of non-Western societies. A second and closely related area of debate concerns the way that we, as researchers, engage with our region of study. This involves an evaluation of our interaction with individuals and local communities, as well as policy-makers and practitioners, at the site of fieldwork activity and beyond, and, by extension, a critical reflection on the nature of the knowledge being generated. The seminar series embodied these debates and focused attention on the following three main areas:

- The usefulness of the category of post-socialism and the post-socialist condition;
- The value of exploring and comparing the experience of trans-national and global processes evident within different (Eastern and Western) localities;
- The necessity and potential for interaction and collaboration among academics, practitioners and policymakers within the region and beyond.

A key priority of the seminar series was to encourage a shift from merely an awareness of the weaknesses of existing frameworks of understanding and the need to debate them, towards an active engagement with, and attempt to resolve, concerns. This, it was hoped, would encourage the advancement of alternative ways of interaction with, and understandings of, the post-socialist region and its lived realities. Furthermore, in challenging the nature of post-socialist change, it was expected that this would stimulate a similar critical assessment of approaches to comprehending societal trends in the 'West' and, in particular, an appreciation of a corresponding diversity of local 'Western' experience. By acknowledging this diversity, it was hoped that existing categories (for example, unique, other, East, West) would be more clearly exposed and broken down to facilitate and allow a more beneficial theoretical and practical East-West comparison. To facilitate such a process of enquiry and activity, a number of *pathways* were identified and integrated into the organization and structure of the individual seminars. These were:

- A continuing assessment of the comparative value and use of locally-grounded knowledge on both a theoretical and a practical level within and beyond the region;
- Conscious support for a structured approach to inter-disciplinary discussion both within the framework of the seminar series and outside its framework of operation within and beyond the region;
- The promotion of direct engagement and discussion among academics, policymakers and practitioners within and beyond the region.

It was felt that the integration of these particular pathways into the organization and structure of the series would facilitate debate and discussion that could shed light on existing understandings of change as well as furthering practical resolution of some of the dilemmas caused by change, specifically in the post-socialist region. The choice of the pathways reflected the experience of the individuals comprising the organizing group, and also drew on existing critical discussion with respect to the region. The pathways also echo wider concerns within the social sciences, namely the need for academia to engage with the policy and practitioner arenas; the value of inter- and multi-disciplinary study; and the gap that often exists between detailed empirical, local-level investigation and theoretical debate. The pathways stipulate the desire to address issues 'within and beyond the region'. It should be acknowledged that the majority of the academics, policymakers and practitioners involved in the series were working in, or originated from, the region of CEE and Russia, so their expertise lay in this geographical area, and the primary starting-point and focus of the series was the post-socialist region (see note 3). However, the attempt to draw in the West (specifically the UK) was nevertheless central to the concerns of the seminar series, specifically the attempt to facilitate trans-national dialogue. This is drawn out in a number of the contributions to this collection (see in particular Kay and Kostenko, and Pilkington).

Each seminar incorporated papers and informal oral contributions from a range of actors spanning both the academic-practitioner-policymaker and the East-West divides.3 The introductory, two-day

workshop in Birmingham concentrated on a preliminary discussion of the series' three main areas of concern as outlined above. The following three seminars advanced these common themes through the lens of social, environmental and economic issues. The concluding two-day workshop in London provided the opportunity to reflect critically on the outcomes of the seminar series as a whole. The flexible and interactive nature of the series enabled a diverse range of academics, practitioners and policymakers from the UK, CEE and Russia to be brought together. This generated a productive dialogue and exchange that facilitated an engagement with the diversity of 'local' and 'lived' experiences within a trans-national, East-West context. In order to aid the development of continuing dialogue, debate and thought, and to familiarize participants with the particular approach adopted through the five individual meetings, we were keen to ensure a core of participants (from both CEE and Russia and the UK) remained involved throughout the series. Conducting the five seminars within one year, and maintaining this core group of participants, provided the opportunity to foster and maintain intellectual momentum with respect to the underlying aims and concerns of the series.

This introductory paper draws out some of the key findings of the seminar series in order to provide a basis for the more focused work of the other contributions. We begin by reviewing some of the current debates concerning the nature of post-socialism and the related notion of a 'post-socialist condition'. A key to this discussion is the relative value of a research approach that seeks to prioritize the experiences and uncover the lived realities of change with respect to a range of individuals and communities at the local level. In addition, we show how an active engagement with the influence of socialist (and pre-socialist) legacies, together with the furthering of inter-disciplinary research frameworks, is crucial to the advancement of post-socialist debate.

Second, discussion concerning the usefulness of the category of post-socialism is promoted by a more profound examination of the existing constructions of post-socialist space that permeate much Western work in connection with countries of CEE and the former Soviet Union (FSU). In this respect, a main border inhibiting the effective implementation of a cross-cultural or trans-national perspective and channel of exchange, and which colours our perspective of the post-socialist region, is that separating 'East' from 'West'. The conceptual, methodological and practical implications of the invention or reinvention of the East-West division are therefore considered.

Third, we move on to explore the potential of a trans-national framework to introduce additional analytical clarity to the idea of post-socialism. Here trans-nationalism is employed as a means for exposing the mutable nature of the state (in the sense of the limitations of both territorial state borders and state powers of governance) and used in a critical sense to draw attention to the different spatial levels (from the supranational to the localized and everyday) at which post-socialism is experienced and negotiated. A deliberate querying of the state's role as a dominant site of post-socialist identity helps highlight the non-essentialist nature of the post-socialist category and enables us to explore its explicatory potential at various scales. A trans-national approach is also utilized in order to encourage knowledge gained at the level of the post-socialist 'local' to be used in various ways beyond that locality or region, thereby promoting the value of Eastern experience relative to Western 'know-how'.

Fourth, we focus on the role of the Western academic working in CEE and Russia. In particular, we reflect on the difficulties faced by academics intent on establishing an effective dialogue with local actors (practitioners and policymakers as well as other academics) and consider to what extent positive action is required by the individual academic to ensure such interaction takes place. Central to this is an exploration of the nature of academic responsibility in the post-socialist region and beyond. For example, the responsibility (or lack of it) to contribute to policy debates, or to provide local research communities with access to research findings. Such concern forms the basis of the final section of this paper. In relation to this, a key theme that emerged during the seminar series related to the importance of a reflexive methodology, with the individual researcher remaining open to the consequences and implications of her or his activities with particular respect to work in the post-socialist region, and also with respect to their own societies and themselves. In this case, academic agency, rather than being understood as a 'naturally' occurring force, is understood as something that requires conscious thought and reflection. This approach emphasizes the scope for action to advance our professional activity and output as academics beyond the confines of academia and, in this case, into the realms of policymaking and practitioner activity. In addition, such an understanding encourages a more considered examination of the temporally and spatially rooted nature of our agency and its implications.

The post-socialist condition

As indicated above, the concept of post-socialism formed a key focal point of the seminar series and much discussion centred on its relevance and usefulness in the contemporary period.[4] Throughout the series we sought to explore the value of the post-socialist categorization at both a conceptual and a methodological level. We hoped, as Verdery suggests, to seek a 'new angle of vision on processes of the socialist and post-socialist periods'.[5] The papers contained within this collection show how some of what we discuss below is used to underpin and structure actual research practice within the region. The debate in recent years over the value of a 'post-socialist' category and the extent to which it refers to something distinctive and worthy of concerted investigation is a necessary one. For example, post-socialism is often deployed as little more than a descriptor, demarcating a part of the globe characterized by countries moving away from socialist-inspired models of development towards market-based democracies. In its most extreme form, 'post-socialism ... reduced to transition'[6] seeks to deny, or refuses to engage with, the socialist past and tends to neglect the influence of the cultural and historical specifics of the post-socialist region on processes of contemporary change. It tends to focus analysis at the state level of political and economic change, or on macro-level social consequences of change (or on both). Post-socialist space is conceptualized as a relatively uncomplicated region of the globe structured by, and made knowable through, discourses of neo-liberal economic change and democratic governance.[7] In response to - and also in spite of - such limited engagements with regional change, research conducted at the local level (initially within areas studies, sociology and anthropology) revealed the specificities of the region and the everyday

experiences of change and demonstrated how both of these are often lost beneath the homogenizing influence of transition discourse and associated generalizing concepts.[8] Furthermore, these efforts suggest that what is occurring at the level of the everyday is being masked by visions of both ritual or symbolic change,[9] and desired (typically Western) change.[10]

In essence, such efforts are united by their openness to understanding the ways in which the post-socialist context itself produces distinctive - but in some cases familiar - social, economic, political and environmental trends. In other words, they are interested in determining the explicatory, rather than simply the descriptive, value of the category 'post-socialist'. It should be stressed that the locally-grounded work referred to here does not set out self-consciously to study the nature of the post-socialist condition. Instead, the particularities of the 'condition' are made apparent through the course of the research process and thus *emerge* as possible explanatory factors for the social phenomena under study. In this vein, Stenning's qualitative, interview-based work in Poland uncovers the way in which socialist experience, as an integral element of the post-socialist condition, is drawn upon by individuals in order to facilitate the negotiation of contemporary uncertainties within the social sphere. Importantly, such work does not aim to dismiss entirely from discussion the discourse, and equally the reality, of 'transition', but instead seeks to question the relevance of such discourse while also acknowledging the role it may have in the formation of what is distinctively post-socialist. Indeed, Stenning moves on to suggest that in her case-study region of Nowa Huta, certain individualized contemporary experiences are intimately associated with the expectations aroused by the nature of transition discourse itself.[11]

Transition discourse should also be acknowledged for its ability to draw attention to a range of social phenomena connected with the implementation of capitalist relations or democratic trends within CEE and the FSU. For example, while notions of regional environmental improvement in tandem with the imposition of market-type infrastructure often ignore the wider, long-term, global environmental implications of capitalism, they do nevertheless concede the potential short-term and localized benefits of such changes resulting from improved levels of economic efficiency.[12]

In many ways, the uncertainty over the meaning and value of the 'post-socialist' category can be traced to our understanding of, and engagement with, the region's socialist experience. The simplification of global geopolitics and associated imaginations during the Cold War period into East versus West encouraged a relatively uniform approach to the Soviet Union and its satellite countries.[13] We shall discuss the historical origins and the process of the invention of 'East' and 'West' below.[14] There is certainly value in exploring the extent to which shared features of the post-socialist countries, some of which are embedded within the context of a shared socialist past, provide a relevant and useful field of comparison.[15] At the same time, there remains the ever-present danger that searches for historical commonality result in the heterogeneity of the region's past and present being played down or even ignored. It is certainly the case that the simple, yet powerful, conceptualization of East and West advanced by the Cold War confrontation remains influential after the events of 1989-91 and undermines exploration of the nature and extent of contemporary difference throughout the region. In so doing, it can suggest, whether intentionally or not, a unified

socialist experience over what is more probably a diverse and historically- and culturally-determined socialist experience.16

It follows from the above that any attempt to comprehend the varied influence of the past for the post-socialist region requires an interrogation of the nature and meaning of socialist legacies - for example, the continuities and discontinuities of present-day practices with those of the past.17 Furthermore, while certain legacies can undermine the effective functioning of contemporary social, economic and political systems, the positive aspects of other legacies should also be acknowledged and explored.18 During the course of the seminar series, the practitioner participants from Russia and Central and Eastern Europe indicated how their formative experience was entrenched in the socialist period, and that this milieu provided a range of practical resources that are often overlooked. For example, professional networks forged before 1989-91 often remain highly relevant in the contemporary period. To put it more bluntly, this past cannot be eradicated, nor should it be, from the memories of the people living in the region as easily as it can be removed from blueprints for the region's future. Furthermore, and more fundamentally, this past cannot be disconnected from the 'wholes' of their experience. As Kandiyoti suggests, 'it is at the level of the quotidian that one finds the clearest expression of habits and expectations acquired during the Soviet period as well as important generational differences in their expression'.19 However, this past is by no means uniform. In the same way that the present is increasingly differentiated, interpretations and uses of the past (for example, via nostalgic memory, active reinvention, rejection and so forth) have become more and more diversified.20 To access this selective and diversified engagement with the past, attention must be given to the practices and perspectives of people in the region, rather than an idealization or denigration of the past from an outsider's perspective.21

In the end, an exploration of locally embedded interpretations of, and engagements with, the changing political and economic context promises to provide an important counter-balance to the normalizing and simplifying tendencies of transition discourse. This type of research approach also encourages a more profound investigation of the varied meanings of socialist legacies, alongside the discovery of new and novel practices and trends that are a product of the present situation and a response to it.22 In a wider sense it is thus more likely to reveal the level of continuity and change between the pre-socialist and socialist past and post-socialist present. This produces a picture of how the present and future are being produced both *in situ* and through the influence of various processes operating on different temporal and spatial scales.

The advancement of an intensive and locally-grounded research framework generates multiple conceptual, practical and logistical questions. One means of resolving such questions is through the furthering of inter-disciplinary research exchange and reflection, which provides a variety of perspectives and different theoretical and methodological approaches. Calls have been made to facilitate a 'fruitful dialogue' between different branches of knowledge,23 and from the outset the seminar series sought to foster such multi- and inter-disciplinary exchange. During discussion, it became clear that substantial common ground existed between the different disciplines. An issue that united most academics involved in the seminar series, from human geography and sociology through

to anthropology and area studies, was how to ensure that the knowledge gained through micro- or local-level research could be made relevant to macro-societal issues of the post-socialist region and beyond, initially on a theoretical level.[24] This parallels concerns in other disciplinary areas. For example, Bebbington, in trying to stimulate debate over the nature of development geography, considers ways of better understanding processes of development and suggests the potential benefits of '"theorizing up" from place-based studies' whilst simultaneously recognizing the inherent conceptual and methodological problems associated with such an approach.[25] A number of contributions in this collection engage precisely with this challenge (see in particular Pilkington). Furthermore, the seminars also explored the actual, lived processes through which this might occur on a more practical level, namely through fostering academic-policymaker-practitioner exchange and sharing local experiences within and beyond the region. This is discussed in more detail below and is also dealt with within the later individual contributions of Kay and Kostenko, Richardson and Taraskin, and Fagan.

Negotiating the 'East'-'West' border

It is clear from the above that a worthwhile interrogation of the post-socialist category must be underpinned by an acknowledgement of the impact of the East-West divide, in both symbolic and real terms. This division was specifically questioned during the course of the seminar series in order to facilitate a movement away from Western academics (and practitioners) talking about and empathizing with issues 'over there', and to open up a space for knowledge and experience to be communicated between and within both East and West. Thus, rather than privileging one regional set of knowledge or experiences over another, the seminars placed an accent on the *exchange* of knowledge whether from East or West and, further, a search for both similarities and difference between localities, both within the region and with localities in the West.

The East-West divide has a long history, and a number of works that emerged during the 1990s endeavoured to explore the origins of 'the crucial structural boundary' that arose to divide East and West.[26] In her article on the former Yugoslavia, Bakič-Hayden indicates how within Orientalist discourse the East and the West are much more a project than a place.[27] Through the existence of this project difference becomes normalized, and this undermines attempts to challenge the basis on which this difference is founded.[28] Importantly, these studies suggest that it is not enough merely to understand the production and existence of cultural constructs, representations and frameworks. It is necessary to take the analysis further to understand 'the force that cultural constructions have in directing human action'.[29] In the seminars, we wished to recognize this force, to gauge its impact upon human action, and to take steps to cross the gulf that has been created (see in particular Fagan, and Richardson and Taraskin, in this collection).

Wolff helps illustrate how 'the force of cultural constructions' influences human action. He traces the roots of the East-West division to the Enlightenment and demonstrates how it was reinforced and continued in very real ways to influence thinking and policy up to the end of the Cold War. He also

suggests that we might take 1989 as 'an incitement and opportunity to reconsider our mental mapping of Europe'.[30] Other work shows how in the contemporary period many of the old constructions and associations persist, remaining unchallenged, thereby revealing how they might continue to influence human activity. Kuus explores how a 're-inscription of otherness' (that is the maintenance and reinforcement of East-West difference) endures, especially with respect to EU and NATO enlargement.[31] Within this re-inscription of otherness, new borders are developing where some former eastern territories are accepted and themselves embrace the West, while others are pushed further to the boundaries by both the 'old' and 'new' West.[32] This process demonstrates the way in which particular 'eastern' regions may engage with the West's own changing priorities and perceptions so as to distance themselves from those regions 'further East'. Differences and grievances that were masked by the demand for ideological conformity under state socialism have also now resurfaced and feed into this process. The agency of former Eastern territories in this process points to the importance of being aware that the East-West relationship is two-way and reciprocal. It follows that when trying to cope with the implications of the East-West binary division for academic exchange and practice between the region and the West, we must not assume that the peoples of the region are trapped or powerless within these narratives.[33]

A new angle of vision? A trans-national approach to post-socialist change

As suggested above, it is one thing to be aware of the limiting nature of existing conceptual frameworks and spatial divisions and quite another both to challenge and to move beyond such limitations. In order to focus attention on the disjuncture between theory and practice, the seminars employed the notion of trans-nationalism as a main conceptual and methodological tool. It can be argued that thinking about 'trans-national spaces' (that is, spaces that de-emphasize geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural divisions) helps us to move away from the political, geographical and regulatory constraints of the state and its borders, and from conceptual constraints imposed by the idea of a general and universal shift from socialism to post-socialism.

The various meanings of trans-nationalism were discussed at the first seminar. Drawing on the existing theoretical literature, some of which is discussed below, trans-nationalism was identified as a concept to aid engagement with and understanding of global patterns and processes and their manifestation at the local level. Fundamentally, a trans-national approach focuses attention on the evident ease with which certain flows of people, money, cultural artefacts and so on move across state boundaries, and the apparent impotence of the state to control and order such flows. Crang and his associates trace trans-national interpretations to academic work that sought to conceptualize economic processes and the rise of the trans-national corporation during the latter part of the twentieth century;[34] indeed, the socio-economic and political ramifications of trans-national economic activity continue to inspire much work in development studies and related areas.[35] Nevertheless, understandings of trans-nationalism have since been fleshed out in order to engage with an array of political, cultural and human flows and processes and, furthermore, have been utilized in order to

explore the different actors implicated within such flows as they move through space and time.36 Critiques have ranged from concern over the actual focus of trans-national studies37 to their tendency to prioritize the 'exotic' over the 'everyday' and mundane. For example, David Ley suggests, in his examination of self-styled 'masters of the universe' (that is, big corporate players), that while cohorts of people may now inhabit trans-national spaces they still live 'everyday lives', and they are still constrained by geographical concerns such as connectivity and difference.38 Similarly, within migration studies, some authors suggest that, while the habitation of trans-national spaces and connections should be explored, the 'concrete locality' and desire to be included within the operating structures of this locality are equally worthy and in need of empirical attention.39

With respect to the post-socialist region, a trans-national framework invites a more intensive examination of contemporary trends. Furthermore, assimilating critiques of trans-nationalism, this is combined with continued attention to the importance and significance of 'place'. First, it encourages a critical engagement with the post-socialist category by refocusing attention on the tension between regional specificity and global discourses and processes of change. Second, the destabilizing qualities of trans-nationalism with respect to existing geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural orderings promotes a greater awareness of the possibility that local responses to specific socio-economic and political stimuli may have similarities with and meaning for other localities which 'on paper' remain geographically distant.40 More specifically, challenging implicit geopolitical and geoeconomic categorizations in this way alters existing power relationships, typically reducible to Western dominance, and encourages a more open engagement with regional experience outside of East-West or, indeed, North-South binary frameworks. Third, by valuing and prioritizing perspectives from the region through trans-national exchange we gain viewpoints from 'outside' that may give us a different vision of issues within our own societies and inform our own self-understanding.41 However, while noting the positive aspects of a trans-national approach as a means for engaging with the post-socialist region, it is important constantly to review its capacity as an explanatory framework and resist formulating such an approach as an antidote to all the perceived failings of state-based studies, and to take care that by moving the focus to the trans-national we do not lose sight of the national, regional or local.42

In spite of the relative abundance of critical work, much West-East interaction remains grounded in the perceived superiority of Western procedures, understandings and 'ways of doing and being'. It would seem that a truly trans-national space must disrupt such inequalities and facilitate a genuine interest on both sides to engage with, and learn from, the experiences of the other. In practical terms, it encourages us to look for the potential value in something rather than the evident weaknesses relative to a theoretical blueprint of how something (such as care work, environmental governance, economic management and so on) should be done. The seminars consciously shifted the focus beyond the specific geographical region of Russia and Central and Eastern Europe, and tried to incorporate experiences of themes and processes from within other localities, for example in the UK. As suggested above, there was an unavoidable bias towards research in CEE and Russia, which reflected the origins of the series and the identity of its participants, and this bias is apparent in the

focus of the articles in this collection. Nevertheless, by emphasizing a process-focused and more global perspective alongside a 'place' perspective, the post-socialist category becomes less essential, and comparison beyond the region is encouraged (see Pilkington, and Kay and Kostenko in this collection). Moving to the individual level, the inherently destabilizing nature of a trans-national approach stimulates a critical engagement with, and reflection on, our own position with respect to the region - on our own thought, experience and practice as Western academics. Through this process we might uncover and challenge wider hidden bias and partiality.43 Ultimately, a main strength of a trans-national approach within the context of the seminar series, and moving beyond the subtleties of interpretation and definition, was its inherent value as a 'sensitizing notion'44 and its ability continually to disrupt our understandings of post-socialist space.

Academic knowledge and lived realities

It was stated above that one of the main motivations of the seminar series was a concern over the role of the Western academic working in CEE and Russia, particularly at the local level. This was rooted to a large extent in the personal experiences of the organizers and a result of reflection on the nature of their interaction with a range of actors and communities in the course of their own research during the 1990s. Furthermore, discussion also focused on the value and salience of empirical work beyond the local context. In many ways, such concerns are a natural consequence of qualitative research, whereby subjective factors generated by personal interaction with individual members of a community, local actors (practitioners and policymakers) and other academics requires constant attention, and can markedly influence the scope and nature of the resulting research. In addition, uncertainty over the role academic work should play in policy and 'real life' issues is not uncommon within the social sciences.45 One area in particular associated with this broader concern, which surfaced repeatedly during the preliminary stages of putting the seminar series together, related to the practical value of academic work at the local level and the associated difficulties of engaging and working productively with individuals and institutions *in situ.*

As suggested above, the structure of the seminars facilitated positive dialogue between academics and practitioners and policymakers from both Russia and CEE and the UK, and discussion revealed possibilities for useful collaboration. At the same time, the deeper structural problems that often prevent such collaboration, or else reinforce the inherited East-West distinction, were also apparent. For example, it can be difficult for the Western academic to move beyond the restricted role of a 'bearer of gifts' (typically through the provision of paid research assistance in the field) in order to engage more meaningfully with local actors, including those outside the academic sector. While initiatives to overcome such obstacles are clearly evident through the collaborative work of all those included in this collection, the limiting institutional structures within which both academics and practitioners operate represent significant barriers.

Discussion also centred on the constraining factors associated with the work of practitioners (in both CEE and Russia and the UK) and the fact that many are under constant pressure to organize work

activity in order to facilitate access to different funding sources. Indeed, their complex work practices, positioned within a web of connections spanning the public and private spheres, ensure that publishing activity, particularly of a critical nature, can offer little benefit, if any. Other limiting factors common to all parties, which emerged repeatedly during discussions, included issues of time, personal energy and language. With regard to the latter, this does not simply refer to ability in foreign languages, but also the linguistic barriers created by technical and conceptual jargon. In the end, academics, practitioners and policymakers may be involved in overlapping areas of work, but they are differently motivated (willingly or not), and their work is rewarded in different ways and according to different assessment criteria. Furthermore, it would seem important to acknowledge that, while academic work may have potential relevance for the activities of practitioners and policymakers, this should not be assumed or taken for granted.

While recognizing the various constraints on academic and practitioner interaction, discussion during the seminars turned towards the experience that was already held by participants and the means for addressing the evident barriers; much debate focused on the importance of fostering mutual respect as a key starting-point. As with successful intra- and inter-disciplinary activities, mutual respect for different work practices and bodies of knowledge is essential if collaboration is to be carried forward. Thus, an ability and willingness on all sides to value work carried out within different ontological, ideological and institutional frameworks forms a crucial element of an effective trans-national exchange, and exchange between different categories: academic, policymaker and practitioner.

The academic as an agent for change

Discussions and debates related to the form and extent of interaction between the academic and her or his region of study also raise concerns over the nature of academic agency and the necessity of fostering awareness of the influence the scholar's presence can have on others, particularly when working in the field and at the local level. Focused research, characterized by intensive engagement with a range of actors, often has a sensitizing effect, particularly for researchers, which can undermine their actions to the extent that they feel unable to make positive contributions. One of the implicit assumptions of the seminars was that academic researchers *do*, and always *will*, make a difference (both positive and negative) simply by being there. In this sense, the key question then is not so much one of minimizing the researcher's 'impact', although this may be an important consideration, but instead looking at the ways in which such influence can be useful or valuable and for whom.

The ability of individual academics to reflect on their actions and remain aware of their own agency relative to those around them helps to challenge the assumption that academics and their research will always have a positive effect. At the same time, such reflection is important for revealing the consequences of unconscious and less formal actions, which can occur during the process of research. Through a concentration on the 'local' during the seminars it became apparent that participants had often been engaged in more informal exchanges in the course of fieldwork within the region, resulting

in outcomes that they had not necessarily recognized or identified at the time. For example, these might occur as the consequence of one-off or chance engagements with individuals within international institutions or else informal exchange and dialogue with local 'user' communities or organizations.

A further area of discussion related to the theme of academic agency, focused on collaborative work with international organizations (business, governmental, non-governmental) operating within the post-socialist region and the extent to which Western academics might positively attempt to engage with such bodies. Interestingly, debate focused on the missed opportunities with respect to such organizations rather than being confined to criticism of their general work practices. This debate revolved round two main points. First, it was felt that there was considerable scope for the academic to facilitate improved dialogue between the academic 'who is privileged to know' and the policymaker or consultant who 'doesn't know', lacks 'particular or local knowledge' or is seen as being 'tainted' by the organization or institution for which he or she works. Large international organizations, be they lending, non-governmental or business entities, should not be seen as 'homogeneous' bodies. Instead, it would seem important to recognize the individual agency within such organizations, and the possibility of establishing productive relations with individuals. Second, there was the general feeling that the academic engaged in locally-based work could be more proactive, where appropriate, in performing 'ambassadorial' roles for their region of study through seeking consultations with intergovernmental organizations or other representative bodies. This might provide an invaluable conduit between locally-situated actors and national and international power structures.

Discussion of the role of the academic active at the local level inevitably touched on her or his responsibilities. In particular, if academics fail to engage with the policymaker or practitioner, are they failing in their responsibility as academics? Tentative conclusions offered here are that the academic should not be *obliged* to engage with the policymaker or practitioner, and that a range of outlets for academic activity must be considered and recognized as equally relevant. Therefore, it is important to address how the output of academic work can be understood in other respects, beyond (formal or informal) engagement with policy, communities, or both, in the region of study. It would be short-sighted to suggest that empirical, locally grounded research conducted in the region, which does not have some sort of policy or practical relevance or fails to move beyond purely academic circles, is irrelevant. As Massey suggests, scholars need to consider the question of whether they really understand the 'outputs' of their research.[47] This might take very concrete forms, namely through the publication of papers, or through direct and real engagement with policymakers and practitioners. However, as suggested above, informal means of communication often produce meaningful and positive results, which are less easily quantifiable.

Furthermore, moving beyond this is the dilemma Massey poses of 'whether, in our actual lives as academics, we really manage to *live* it', that is, the 'disjuncture' between our 'theorizations' of the world and our own behaviour.[48] This may be interpreted in many ways. Martin suggests it is vitally important to link one's academic work, personal politics and everyday life - however, he acknowledges that this is not particularly common.[49] In relation to the aims of these seminars, and the concerns of

this collection of essays and their authors, it perhaps comes back to challenging in our everyday practice those institutional and scholarly frameworks that serve to constrain and silence particular voices, experiences and opinions from the region, and beyond, and to aim to facilitate a more equal and beneficial dialogue. Action could be taken, for example, through teaching within one's own institution; through extra-academic activities of one's own choice; through public debate or media involvement. The ultimate question is how better to use knowledge that is acquired often through a long-term investment in and commitment to the region - and the answer to this is inevitably highly personal.

Exploring locally situated concerns

The five individual contributions to this collection raise many of the themes introduced above. The contributions originate from the seminars 'Local Responses to Global Challenges' and 'Mobilizing Resources for Environmental Protest'. However, the authors were all participants in the introductory and concluding seminars. They therefore contributed to discussions at that time, and they raise in their articles the broader concerns discussed in this paper. The individual contributions, some of which are co-authored, demonstrate the value of collaborative research and of writing across East-West and academic-practitioner boundaries, and highlight both the advantages and possible problems of such activities.

The first three articles explore different aspects of youth perception and practice of drug use in the Russian Federation. In her article '"For us it is normal": Exploring the Recreational Use of Heroin in Russian Youth Cultural Practice', Hilary Pilkington explores the potential for the cross-cultural application of the 'normalization thesis' relating to drug use within society. In particular, she investigates how a specific aspect of the 'normalization' thesis (namely, a distinction between 'recreational' and 'problem' drug use) can be applied to understand drug use beyond the temporal and spatial context where it originated (the north-west of England in the 1990s), that is to drug practices among young people in a number of urban areas in the Russian Federation in 2002-3. The study shows the value of in-depth, local-level and multi-sited research for revealing the contradictions and possible problems with existing theorization of drug use and drug cultural practice.

The study by Elena Omel'chenko (Ulyanovsk State University, Russia), '"You can tell by the way they talk": Analysing the Drugs Vocabulary of Young People in Russia', naturally follows on from Pilkington's article, and draws upon empirical data gathered from the same research project. Omel'chenko explores the gap that exists between official state discourse and the vocabulary of young people with respect to drug use, and shows how work focusing on young people's perception of drugs in their everyday lives and the terminology they use to 'talk about drugs' can highlight existing shortfalls in official drugs policy discourse and could inform future drug-prevention development. The final contribution to this section 'Mobilizing Youth for Health: Politics and Peer Education in Post-Soviet Russia', by Erica Richardson (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) and Oleg Taraskin (Healthy Futures non-governmental organization, Saratov, Russia), explores the development process

of grassroots volunteer youth movements in Russia, specifically related to health and drugs education programmes. Based on locally gathered empirical data, it examines how youth may be mobilized within drug policy initiatives in Saratov, Russia. Furthermore, it draws attention to the historically rooted obstacles to East-West collaboration in the area of youth health issues.

The next contribution moves to address another issue of trans-national significance, that of a 'crisis of masculinity'. In their article 'Men in Crisis or in Critical Need of Support? Insights from Russia and the UK', Rebecca Kay (University of Glasgow, UK) and Maxim Kostenko (Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men, Barnual, Russia) explore the nature of this 'state of crisis' through a comparative Russia-UK lens, and from the academic and practitioner perspectives. On the basis of ethnographic data from research conducted in provincial Russia, the authors identify the barriers to and the need for specific support programmes for men in post-Soviet Russia, and explore one such programme in practice: the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men. The article concludes by suggesting the usefulness and applicability of findings from this case study to other locations within and beyond the post-socialist region, and the value of exchanging models of good practice within an international framework. The final article, 'Trans-national Aid for Civil Society Development in Post-socialist Europe: Democratic Consolidation Or a New Imperialism?' by Adam Fagan (Queen Mary, University of London), directly addresses the problematic East-West divide, and questions the value of 'trans-national' exchange, by exploring the nature of aid for civil society development in CEE and, more specifically, Bosnia-Herzegovina. This article reiterates the necessity of being sensitive to the local historical, social and cultural context in developing 'civil society' initiatives, and highlights the need for a greater critique of dominant conceptual frameworks concerning the role of NGOs and their scope for protesting state action.

Concluding remarks

To reiterate what we hope is evident through this introductory article, the seminar series was not a unique attempt to initiate a new debate with respect to the theorization and empirical study of the post-socialist region. It reflected and built upon the extensive work that has already been done since 1989-91. However, it went on to foster dynamic and innovative ways of taking the debate forward. Perhaps the key outcome of the seminar series for the organizers was its affirmation of the importance of finding the time and creating the opportunity to discuss ideas and understandings with a range of actors (academics, practitioners, policymakers) from both East and West. Discussion revealed the marked extent to which academics, practitioners and policymakers share common concerns. Yet prevailing institutional structures and personal priorities ensure that these are often articulated in different ways and communicated through different mediums. This contributes to the formation of parallel and often isolated bodies of knowledge and understanding. From an academic perspective, many of the core issues raised during the course of the seminars reflect concerns apparent right across the social sciences. These include the need to challenge essentialist categorizations, the querying of the role of the researcher and her or his work, the value of research practice which prioritizes a deliberate exploration of day-to-day lives, and an assessment of how such

locally-grounded work can be made relevant for macro-level studies and wider theoretical and conceptual debate.

Recent contributions to the post-socialist debate have drawn attention to the potential synergies that exist with conceptual frameworks related to other scholarly traditions, such as post-colonial studies.50 Furthermore, there are clear points of overlap between post-socialist work and similar theorizing in development studies. In many respects this degree of comparability is unsurprising. Recent and continuing initiatives in such disciplinary areas are directed towards breaking down existing binary divisions (such as East and West, or North and South) and focusing attention on the agency of individuals and communities within these regions in order to highlight the complex way in which lives are constituted on a daily basis. At the same time, the need to theorize and understand the influence of national and supranational processes and the influence of the past is acknowledged. These types of observations echo those raised here and reveal the obvious scope for greater dialogue between the different fields of study.

The conclusions drawn from the seminars suggest that 'post-socialism' remains a relevant category, which draws attention to the commonality of (socialist) experience that exists within and between certain regions and countries within CEE and the former Soviet Union. In addition, at certain levels of analysis, this commonality has explanatory value. Nevertheless, in recognition of the stage at which the debate on post-socialism and much of the current research being conducted in the region now stands, it is vital not to accept uncritically the post-socialist condition. Instead one must recognize its relative value as an explanatory category, and, furthermore, be aware of the specificity of place and the potential theoretical and practical significance of particular experience for other regions and localities. In the studies that follow this recognition is clearly evident.

Notes

1. Co-organized by Jonathan Oldfield (University of Birmingham), Moya Flynn and Rebecca Kay (University of Glasgow), Adrian Smith and Adam Fagan (Queen Mary, University of London) and Tassilo Herrschel (University of Westminster). An introductory two-day workshop was held at Birmingham University in December 2003; the following seminar, 'Local Responses to Global Challenges', was held at the University of Glasgow in April 2004; the second seminar 'Mobilizing Resources for Environmental Protest', was held at Queen Mary, University of London, in May 2004; the third seminar, 'Rethinking "Economy" in Post-Socialism', was held at Queen Mary, University of London, in September 2004; and a concluding two-day workshop was held at the University of Westminster in October 2004

2. For example, Sue Bridger and Frances Pine (eds.), *Surviving Post-Socialism: Local Strategies and Regional Responses in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (London: Routledge, 1998); Chris Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London and New York:

Routledge, 2002); John Pickles and Adrian Smith (eds.), *Theorising Transition: The Political Economy of Post-communist Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1998).

3. Approximately 80 per cent of the participants were academics (or possessed academic affiliation of some nature), the remainder comprising practitioners, policymakers and other professionals. Furthermore, one third of those categorized as 'non-academic' were from CEE and Russia, as were 50 per cent of the postgraduate students attending the seminars.

4. See Caroline Humphrey, 'Introduction: Does the Category "Postsocialist" Still Make Sense?' (with Chris Hann and Katherine Verdery), in Hann, *Postsocialism*, pp.1-28.

5. Katherine Verdery, 'Introduction: Whither Postsocialism?' (with Chris Hann and Caroline Humphrey), in Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism*, p.15.

6. Alison Stenning, 'Post-socialism and the Changing Geographies of the Everyday in Poland', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (New Series)*, Vol.30 (2005), pp.113-27 (p.113).

7. Kathrin Hörschelmann, 'History After the End: Post-socialist Difference in a (Post)modern World', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (New Series)*, Vol.27 (2002), pp.52-66; Adrian Smith 'Imagining Geographies of the "New Europe": Geo-economic Power and the New European Architecture of Integration', *Political Geography*, Vol.21 (2002), pp.647-70.

8. See Sue Bridger and Frances Pine, 'Introduction: Transitions to Post-socialism and Cultures of Survival', in Bridger and Pine (eds.), *Surviving Post-Socialism*, pp.1-15; Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, 'Introduction', in Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery (eds.), *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Post-Socialist World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp.1-17; Rebecca Kay, *Russian Women and their Organizations: Gender, Discrimination and Grassroots Women's Organizations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Hilary Pilkington, *Migration, Identity and Displacement in Post-Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 1998); Moya Flynn, *Migrant Resettlement in the Russian Federation: Reconstructing Homes and Homelands* (London: Anthem, 2004).

9. Bridger and Pine (ed.), *Surviving Post-Socialism*, p.5.

10. Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism*, p.1

11. Stenning, 'Post-socialism and the Changing Geographies', p.124.

12. See Jonathan D. Oldfield, *Russian Nature: Exploring the Environmental Consequences of Societal Change* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

13. Merje Kuus, 'Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe', *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol.28, No.4 (2004), pp.472-89 (p.474).

14. See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

15. Burawoy and Verdery (eds.), *Uncertain Transition*, p.15.

16. See Bridger and Pine (eds.), *Surviving Post-Socialism*, pp.5-6.

17. Burawoy and Verdery, *Uncertain Transition*, pp.1-2; Smith and Pickles, 'Introduction: Theorising Transition and the Political Economy of Transformation', in Pickles and Smith (eds.), *Theorising Transition*, pp.1-22; Chris Pickvance, *Local Environmental Regulation in Post-socialism: A Hungarian Case Study* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp.8-11; Adam Swain and Jane Hardy, 'Globalization, Institutions, Foreign Investment and the Reintegration of East and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union with the World Economy', *Regional Studies*, Vol.32, No.7 (1998), pp.587-90.

18. Oldfield, *Russian Nature*, pp.21-41; Swain and Hardy, 'Globalization', pp.588-9.

19. Denis Kandiyoti, 'How Far Do Analyses of Postsocialism Travel? The Case of Central Asia', in Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism*, p.252.

20. Bridger and Pine (eds.), *Surviving Post-Socialism*, p.6; see also Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, 'Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol.92, No.3 (2002), pp.534-47.

21. Humphrey, 'Introduction: Does the Category "Postsocialist" Still Make Sense?', p.14.

22. Burawoy and Verdery (eds.), *Uncertain Transition*, p.2; see also Bridger and Pine (eds.), *Surviving Post-socialism*, pp.2, 6; Stenning, 'Post-socialism and the Changing Geographies', p.123.

23. Hann, 'Introduction: Farewell to the Socialist "Other"' (with Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery), in Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism*, p.5.

24. See ibid, p.7.

25. Anthony Bebbington, 'Global Networks and Local Developments: Agendas for Development Geography', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol.94, No.3 (2003), pp.297-309 (pp.303-4).

26. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p.1.

27. Milica Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review*, Vol.54, No.4 (1995), pp.917-31 (p. 917).

28. Kuus, 'Europe's Eastern Expansion', p.484

29. Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms', p.930.

30. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p.15.

31. Kuus, 'Europe's Eastern Expansion', p.478.

32. Kuus, 'Europe's Eastern Expansion, p.479; Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms, pp.918, 922-31; Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p.15.

33. Kuus, 'Europe's Eastern Expansion', p.479.

34. Philip Crang, Claire Dwyer and Peter Jackson, 'Transnationalism and the Spaces of Commodity Culture', *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol.27, No.4 (2003), pp.438-56 (p.439).

35. See, for example, Jeffrey Bury, 'Livelihoods in Transition: Trans-national Gold Mining Operations and Local Change in Cajamarca, Peru', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.170, No.1 (2004), pp.78-91; Robert N. Gwynne, 'Transnational Capitalism and Local Transformation in Chile', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol.94, No.3 (2003), pp.310-21.

36. See, for example, Ian Cook and Michelle Harrison, 'Cross-over Food: Rematerializing Postcolonial Geographies', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol.28 (2003), pp.296-317; Crang *et al.*, 'Transnationalism and the Spaces of Commodity Culture'; Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt, 'The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol.22, No.2 (1999), pp.217-37.

37. See Crang et al., 'Transnationalism and the Spaces of Commodity Culture'.

38. David Ley, 'Transnational Spaces and Everyday Lives', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (New Series)*, Vol.29 (2004), pp.151-64.

39. See Flynn, *Migrant Resettlement*, p.29; Caroline Nagel, 'Geopolitics By Another Name: Immigration and the Politics of Assimilation', *Political Geography*, Vol.20, No.2 (2002), pp.971-87 (p.981); Osten Wahlbeck, 'The Concept of Diaspora as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Refugee Communities', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol.28, No.2 (2002), pp.221-38 (pp.232-3).

40. See also Bridger and Pine (eds.), *Surviving Post-socialism*, p.8, and Kandyioti, 'How Far Do Analyses of Postsocialism Travel?' p.254.

41. See Humphrey 'Introduction: Does the Category "Postsocialist" Still Make Sense?', p.15, and Verdery, 'Introduction: Whither Postsocialism', pp.18-19; also the contributions by Kay and Kostenko, and by Pilkington, in the present collection.

42. See also Crang et al., 'Transnationalism and the Spaces of Commodity Culture', pp. 442-3.

43. See Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p.368.

44. Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere, 'Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure: Introduction', in Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere (eds.), *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999), pp.1-15, cited in Crang et al., 'Transnationalism and the Spaces of Commodity Culture', p.439.

45. See, for example, Ron Martin, 'Geography and Public Policy: The Case of the Missing Agenda', *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol.25, No.2 (2001), pp.189-210; Jane Pollard, Nick Henry, John Bryson and Peter Daniels, 'Shades of Grey? Geographers and Policy', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (New Series)*, Vol.25, (2000), pp.243-8; Julie Hemment, 'Strategizing Gender and Development: Action Research and Ethnographic Responsibility in the Russian Provinces', in Kathleen Kuehnast and Carol Nechemias (eds), *Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), pp.313-34.

46. See Fagan's contribution, below.

47. Doreen Massey, 'Editorial: Practising Political Relevance', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (New Series)*, Vol.25 (2000), pp.131-3 (p.133).

48. Ibid. (original emphasis).

49. Martin, 'Geography and Public Policy', p.194.

50. See, for example, Michael Bradshaw and Alison Stenning, 'Introduction: Transformation and Development', in Michael Bradshaw and Alison Stenning (eds.), *East Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union: The Post-socialist States* (Harlow: Pearson, 2004), pp.1-32; Kuus, 'Europe's Eastern Expansion', p.473; Verdery, 'Introduction: Whither Postsocialism?', p.16.