Faith, Hope, Neoliberalism: Mapping Economies of Violence on the Margins of Europe

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Abstract. This paper explores the manner in which the east of Europe has been theorized in the post cold war environment, and the implications for our understanding of the relationship between east and west. It argues that hegemonic discourses of neoliberalism lend a quality of inevitability to the integration of east into west, which in turn leads to a singular conception of Europe at the end of a trajectory of development. The paper argues that the relationship of western Europe to eastern Europe is more fruitfully explored through the conceptual framework of a center to its margins, which allows for a broader range of analysis on the issues – conceptual and implementational – at stake in transition processes, and which will allow for a theoretical exploration of where power is located and exercised. Because eastern Europe is understood in scholarly and policy communities as politically and geographically European, the study of postcommunist transition in Europe falls outside the purview of a development studies community that is increasingly focused on the emerging north/south divide. In a scholarly environment where the East/West divide no longer constitutes a salient focus of study, there is a need for the development of a framework that will provide a richer understanding of the reconstituted relationships being formed in Europe in the post-cold war environment. This paper argues that the social, economic, and political impact of disciplinary neoliberalism in eastern Europe can benefit from an analysis that takes into consideration the Eurocentric, disciplinary power that lies at the core of the transition process. Toward this end, it is necessary to query the discursive foundations of what constitutes the ‘properly European’ in order to develop a framework for a more fruitful course of analysis with respect to the relationship between Europe and its fluctuating eastern margins.

“There is no pure non-violence, but only degrees and economies of violence, some of which are more fruitful than others.”

It is hardly worth mentioning anymore that the post cold war world has been increasingly characterized by the centripetal forces of economic globalization with its attendant free trade regimes, international financial institutions, and neoliberal regulatory frameworks within which international economic and political relationships are forged. International attention to the processes and effects of globalization has been marked by ambiguity, often caught between the seeming inevitability of the ineffable progress of neoliberal restructuring and the concomitant backlash that is said to be evident in the centrifugal forces of identity politics and nationalism in the developing world. Indeed,
perhaps what is most striking about the steady encroachment of neoliberalism on the peoples and societies of the world is the seeming inevitability, or naturalness, of its progress and the extreme marginalization of its detractors. Supporters of globalization point to (future) reductions in poverty, greater social mobility, access to markets, and steadily growing GDPs; detractors point to growing poverty margins, human conditions of misery in export processing zones, and a net loss in democratic accountability as the exigencies and contingencies of daily life depend more and more on corporate leadership than on the traditional representative institutions of state. Accordingly, a flurry of literature dealing with globalization “post cold war” has developed. This phenomenon has coincided with a shift in academic attention from the “old” east-west divide to the “new” north-south chasm and, indeed, there is growing attention to the fundamental inequalities that characterize this relationship.

The scholarly withdrawal from the “hard” divide between the east and west of Europe is indicative of the inefficacy of theorizing Europe along the conceptual lines provided by (and constitutive of) the immobile fixtures of the cold war. Concomitantly, there is a general understanding among scholars and policymakers alike that the termination of the cold war divide in both ideological and geographical terms has been replaced by the appearance of, or desire for, a “complete” Europe that is (or is moving toward) a liberal, democratic, market-oriented uniform entity. This study seeks to query these processes, and the claims that appear to render them both natural and inevitable outcomes for the states and peoples that occupy the spaces of “east”. At the core of this exploration lies the question of how best to approach the study of these processes in a political and intellectual environment that is dominated by the concept of “postcommunism” as a replacement for eastern Europe, which carries with it the understanding that the postcommunist state is a state of transition that leads to a singular posited outcome: entry into the institutional and conceptual terrain of “Europe”.

With the apparent closure of the east-west divide (or at least its dramatic minimization) the scholarly attention that rushed to the collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe, and to analyze the destruction of the Soviet Union and the wreckage of the SFR Yugoslavia has slowly thinned out, save for those who moved on to the as yet unclear future of the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Caucasus or those (like myself) who still look on at the long-failing international attempt at continued political triage in places like Bosnia and Kosovo. Those post-1989 states that retained their authoritarian leadership (namely, Belarus, Slovakia until the end of the 1990s, Croatia until the demise of Tudjman, and the limbless Yugoslavia until the ousting of Milosevic in October 2000) were increasingly looked upon as