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Narrating the Diverse Regional Economies of Post-Socialist Apparel

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1. Introduction

In 1975 Vaclav Havel wrote an open letter to Gustav Husak, then president of Czechoslovakia, to illustrate how, in controlling information and public life, the communist state had produced a particular kind of history in which

History was replaced by pseudo-history, by a calendar of rhythmically recurring anniversaries, congresses, celebrations, and mass gymnastic events, i.e., by precisely the kind of artificial activity that is not an open-ended play of agents confronting one another, but a one-dimensional, transparent, and utterly predictable self-manifestation (and self-celebration) of a single, central agent of truth and power. Quoted in Rupnik (1988: 232).

The result was that history was replaced (or represented) ‘by stories which provide a new history: a timeless succession of unchanging rituals’ (Rupnik 1988: 219). It was not necessary for people to believe this official history; ‘it was sufficient when they simply behaved as if they did, as indeed did their rulers’ (Kalb et al. 1999: 10).

In this chapter we suggest that, since 1989, economic transformations in post-socialist Europe have been similarly framed discursively as a series of very particular, albeit democratic, kinds of stories. These are fast becoming ritualized stories of building markets, institutionalizing systems of governance, and recapitalizing people and regions as information and innovation managers. However, as Havel suggested much earlier, people throughout the region do not necessarily believe in the stories. Neoliberal representations of post-socialist economic transition to capitalism require only that they can be treated as if they are believed. We call this the troping of transition. But, as Havel well knew, such tropes also have the function of invisibilizing the real conditions of social and economic life, while privileging very specific forms
of social and economic organization and particular segments of society. There is, then, a disjuncture between the troping of regional transitions and the materialities of actually existing transitions in the post-socialist economies (Pickles and Smith 1998, 2005).

In unpacking and critiquing the means by which these tropes and their associated narratives have been constructed and consolidated, we have focused our research over the past two decades on post-socialist regional economies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the context of the rapidly expanding and deepening organization of global value chains. The expansion of brand- and retailer-driven buyer networks in conditions of late socialist, post-socialist, enlargement and post-2008 ‘crisis/austerity’ Europe has been consequential for the changing economic geographies of the region. For conceptual and methodological reasons, we have elected to focus over this period of time on the iconic example of the apparel industry. It is a major employer, particularly in low-income regions. It has historically played a crucial role in industrialization strategies throughout the region, with its low barriers to entry and its broader effects on related branches (including engineering, automotive components such as seating systems, information management, design and marketing). It internationalized earlier than many industries by outsourcing German and other (largely continental) European contracts to state socialist enterprises from the 1970s on (Fröbel et al. 1980). Furthermore, the apparel industry is one that has long been embedded at the heart of integrated inter-firm production systems and industrial districts in both planned and market economies. Since 2005 it has had to struggle with the final phases of global quota removal and the consequences of competition from lower-cost producers (especially China), European Union (EU) enlargement, Eurozone expansion, and with the 2008 financial crisis its attendant decline in demand.

For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on three ways in which the regional economies of apparel are being ritualized and narrativized. Each emerges in the broader context of discursive political, economic and research institutions, but each also plays itself out in CEE with particular force. Together, these have come to play a significant role in producing a centred ‘common-sense’ about the industry and its role in contemporary regional economic development. The result is a kind of ‘logic’ that privileges emerging economic branches at the expense of traditional and still resilient industries (Pickles and Smith 2011, Smith et al. 2014). In the process, it elides the complexities of actually existing regional economies, instead contributing to increasingly monolithic and limiting conceptions of what are the contemporary drivers of apparel regional economies. The first trope deals with ‘sweated labour’ and with the scripting of post-socialist labour markets through the spectacle of the CEE ‘sweatshop’ and its historical predecessor the ‘gulag’ (Pickles 2002). Scripting apparel work in this way in the 1990s was an important intervention in the increasingly predatory nature of regional