

The Many Faces of Late Socialism: The Individual in the Eastern Bloc, 1953-1988. Maike Lehmann, University of Cologne, 26.05.2016–28.05.2016.

Reviewed by Alexandra Oberländer

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2016)

Who and what was the individual in late socialism? How much plurality and diversity existed in late socialism, was individuality accepted and allowed or appropriated and assumed? And when exactly was late socialism? These were the questions discussed at this workshop, carefully organized and orchestrated by Maike Lehmann at the University of Cologne. The papers covered the period from roughly 1953 to 1991, ranged from the GDR to the Soviet Urals, and brought together sociologists, historians, and anthropologists from the stage of early career to established scholar. Particularly fruitful was the format chosen for this workshop: each panel had two discussants who commented on the pre-circulated papers which allowed for a broad scope of ideas.

The speakers at this workshop presented a plethora of fascinating histories. We encountered a Bulgarian couple sailing in a tiny boat from Europe to Cuba who fashioned themselves as sexy socialist popstars, presented by NADEZHDA GALABOVA (Sofia). With PÉTER VUKMAN (Szeged) we met the hardcore Yugoslavian Stalinist Obrad Doroslovački who spent his life to a large extent in political exile in socialist Hungary; with NATASHA WILSON (London) we visited the room 242 on Moscow's Lomonosov Prospect, a hotbed of new left dissidents who closely followed Alende's experiment in Chile and dreamt of a truly international socialist movement. And we realized that Khrushchev's Thaw was lively, future-

oriented, and promising due to the extraordinary enthusiasm of pensioners above 60, presented by ALISSA KLOTS (Rutgers) and MARIA ROMASHOVA (Perm). In this sense, we truly met individuals as their stories are not necessarily representative for the rest of their societies. The sailing couple was an exception of the Bulgarian everyday – and this why they became popstars. The Yugoslavian Stalinist had his few allies, but fought a lost battle. The Moscow “Young socialists” were a tiny group of friends who were prosecuted as dissidents. And while Khrushchev's pensioners might have shared an enthusiasm for the re-born Leninist project in the Soviet 1950s, they were unable to pass this on to the next generation. Hence, the late socialist project offered an array of options and lifestyles. As ALEKSANDR BIKBOV (Moscow) stressed, the end of the class approach, which manifested itself in the new Program of the Soviet Communist Party in 1961, was the beginning of an individualized discourse that grew over the last two decades of the European socialist experiment.

Analytically, individualism remained blurry throughout the conference, both in terms of concept as well as empirical evidence. Subjectivity has been one central element in studying the history of the early Soviet Union for almost two decades. This paradigm complemented and contradicted the more traditional notions of totalitarian theory and revisionist social history. As much as subjectivity histories have reinvigorated the

field of Soviet History since the 1990s, it slowly seems to inform scholars of Eastern Europe, too.

As many papers stressed, late socialism provided options and possibilities for individuals to choose to which collective identity they wanted to belong. In some cases hybrid identities were explicitly encouraged and willfully appropriated. In ALFRID BUSTANOV's paper (St. Petersburg), for instance, citizens developed decidedly Soviet-Muslim identities. They incorporated religious practices and Soviet rhetoric, accepted Soviet society and ideology, and thus contributed to the Soviet experiment. Other papers by GALINA ZELENINA (Moscow) and LÁSZLÓ KÜRTI (Miskolc), however, contested those options and choices and instead stressed the traditional totalitarian aspects of late socialism. Although never explicitly mentioned, notions of freedom or free will were a constant undercurrent in all of the papers. For example, in ANATOLY PINSKY's (St. Petersburg) paper we met Soviet writers who opted to mourn Stalin's death in depth although there was no official assignment for mourning. Pinsky followed the grief of authors like Evgenii Shvarts and Aleksandr Tvardovskii, which is displayed – however silently – in their diaries. Other than the Soviet communist leaders who seemed to have forgotten Stalin's death within a relatively short period of time, the Soviet writers were constantly touching upon the topic in their private notes. Such freedom of choice was possible in mourning as well as in nutrition, as ESTHER WAHLEN (Florence) showed in her paper on the consumption habits of Romanians. Wahlen argued that the socialist country Romania explicitly “mobilized ideas about individual autonomy and responsibility for their social politics.” By focusing on individual choices these consumption politics “presented a comparatively cheap and promising alternative to state-imposed public food programs” and thus seem to be closer to current neoliberal politics than to totalitarian notions of the socialist experiment. To what extent individualistic discourses were functionalized for socialist discourses was not a prominent

question at this particular conference but it might be worthwhile to follow up on it in the upcoming workshop in spring 2017. The scope of individualism and the many faces of individuals presented in the papers delivered a pluralist picture of late socialism, without explicitly naming individualism as a crucial feature of its societies or as a definite no-go. While such individualism clearly had its boundaries, was it really only a conceded “individualism from above,” as JULIANE FÜRST (Bristol) commented? Who set the limits and what exactly was the “negotiation” between the state and the individuals asked VOLKER BENKERT (Arizona State University).

The geographic span of this conference, the entire Eastern Bloc, illuminated the decidedly different histories and approaches that each of the countries took – not to mention the decidedly different lives that people led and the choices that they made. Especially virulent are those different paths when it comes to the time span that the conference covered and the question of how to frame this period. When was late socialism? The Eastern European countries seem to be stuck within a Soviet time frame, when everything since the Thaw or at least the 1970s is considered as late socialism. For most of Eastern Europe “late socialism” encompasses more or less their entire existence as nations within the Soviet Bloc and is therefore too broad of a category anyway. In the conference's last paper, COURTNEY DOUCETTE (Rutgers) argued for a rigorously new understanding of late socialism within the USSR, which would have repercussions on understanding late socialism in Eastern Europe, too. According to her paper, late socialism was confined to the years between 1985 and 1991. Doucette demonstrated to what extent *perestroika* and *glasnost* should not so much be understood as the gradual decline of socialist ideas and slow transformation into something unsocialist, but should rather be seen as a reinvigoration of socialist ideas that resembled the spirit of Khrushchev's Thaw. Thus, Doucette stressed the potential for a Soviet rejuvenation during the Gor-

bachev Reforms by analyzing the contents of the word *glasnost*. *Glasnost* “related to the individual’s active involvement in a social setting” and thus captures an explicitly socialist lifestyle, in which the individual is intrinsically conceptualized within its society.

Where does this conference leave us? It certainly demonstrated that the European socialist bloc underwent a distinct change somewhere around the 1960s. The spirit of the Polish 1970s, however limited, shows more liberties than the Polish 1950s. Individualism gradually found its way into the socialist rhetoric and lifestyles. The conference did not address the question of whether this gradual development somehow fed into the collapse of the socialist experiment. The majority of the papers concentrated on meanings and practices of individualism within a socialist agenda. However, the subjects discussed were mostly intellectuals (writers, dissidents, political/religious leaders) and not so much youth (Volker Benkert, UKU LEMBER (Bukarest/Upsala) or simply workers (RORY ARCHER (Graz)). The question of “generation” and its implications has kept many generations of scholars occupied and will remain unsolved for the time being as this workshop did not succeed in either burying or revitalizing the concept. More important, at least for the framework of this workshop, will be the category of individualism/individuality. Questions, which might be pursued in the following workshops, could be to what extent the everyday and as such individual lives of Yugoslavian workers were distinct from those in the GDR, Soviet Georgia, or those in Pittsburgh? In other words, to what extent is individualism really a matter of autonomous individual choices or to what extent is individuality always a reaction to prescribed conditions? Thus, it might be particularly fruitful to investigate a notion that Volker Benkert addressed in his paper on GDR youth, namely negotiation. Especially in those cases where more than just two actors engage in negotiations (state vs. individual being the orthodox notion) could this focus

shed new light on questions of individuality. This workshop has thus introduced some important and novel approaches to the study of individuality in the Eastern Bloc as well as worked towards a better understanding of what we mean when we speak of “late socialism.”

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Maike Lehmann: The Many Faces of Late Socialism

Panel I: Ascriptions - Conceptualizations – Negotiations. Defining the Role of the ‘Individual’ under Late Socialism

Chair: Philine Apenburg (University of Cologne)

Anatoly Pinsky (European University, St. Petersburg): The Leader Will Withers Away: The Leader in the Early Post-Stalin USSR and Implications for the Concept of the Individual

Kyrill Kunakhovich (William & Mary): Cultural Individualism: Artists, Officials, and City Residents in Kraków and Leipzig

Discussants:

Simon Huxtable (Loughborough University) / Jaromír Mrňka (Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies Munich)

Panel II: Ascriptions - Conceptualizations – Negotiations. Defining the Role of the ‘Individual’ under Late Socialism – continued

Chair: Philine Apenburg (University of Cologne)

Alexander Bikbov (Lomonosov Moscow State University): Origins of the Late Socialist Personality: an Uncontrolled Result of Governmental Reforms

Esther Wahlen (European University Institute, Florence): “Self-control” and “Self-knowledge”: Fashioning Consumer Subjectivities in Late Socialist Romania

Discussants: Juliane Fürst (University of Bristol) / Jaromír Mrňka (Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies Munich)

Panel III: Mediating the 'Individual' and the Collective

Chair: Volker Benkert (Arizona State University)

Adela Hîncu (CEU, Budapest): Narrowing Down on the Individual in Late-Socialist Romania: Transnational Analytical Concerns in the Sociological Sciences

Moritz Florin (Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg): Chyngyz Aitmatov and the Scandal of Individuality in Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Discussants: Maike Lehmann (University of Cologne) / Uku Lember (New Europe College, Bukarest/Upsala University)

Panel IV: Late Socialist Milieus – Community, Cohesion and Pluralism

Chair: Sebastian Lambertz (University of Cologne)

Alfrid Bustanov (European University, St. Petersburg): Bridging Socialism and Shari'a by Soviet Imams

László Kürti (University of Miskolc): Citizens and Party Secretaries: Trust and the Workings of Grievance Committees in Hungary in the 1970s
 Nguyen Vu Thuc Linh (European University Institute, Florence): Affective Community: Jacek Kuroń's Political Milieu in Late-Socialist Poland

Discussants: Gregor Feindt (University of Bremen) / Walter Sperling (LMU München)

Panel V: Of a Certain Generation – Individual Perspectives on Age and Ideology

Chair: Rebecca Großmann (University of Cologne)

Volker Benkert (Arizona State University): Negotiated Spaces - Negotiated Careers – Negotiated Lives: Young East Germans and Late Socialism

Natasha Wilson (UCL, London)

"Room 242, Lomonosov Prospect": The dissident Experience of the young Socialists within Moscow state University and IMEMO

Discussants: Alexandra Oberländer (Research Center for East European Studies Bremen) / Rory Archer (University of Graz)

Panel VI: Of a Certain Generation – Individual Perspectives on Age and Ideology – continued

Chair: Rebecca Großmann (University of Cologne)

Péter Vukman (University of Szeged): The Political Views, Strategies and Self-understanding of Obrad Doroslovački, Yugoslav Political Emigrant in Hungary

Alissa Klots (Rutgers University) & Maria Romashova (Perm University): Lenin's Cohort: The First Mass Generation of Soviet Pensioners and Public Activism of the Khrushchev Era

Discussants: Galina Goncharova (Sofia University) / Anatoly Pinsky (European University, St. Petersburg)

Panel VII: Be/longing under Late Socialism

Chair: Alfrid Bustanov (European University, St. Petersburg)

Uku Lember (New Europe College, Bukarest/Upsala University): Ethnicity, Ideology and Belonging in Russian-Estonian Mixed Families in Soviet Estonia during Late Socialism

Galina Goncharova (Sofia University)

Love Stories from the Times of the "Real Socialism": The Case of the Female Admirers of the Bulgarian Young Poet Kalin Yanakiev

Discussants: Kyrill Kunakhovich (William & Mary) / Alexandra Oberländer (Research Center for East European Studies Bremen)

Panel VIII Be/longing under Late Socialism – continued

Chair: Alfrid Bustanov (European University, St. Petersburg)

Nadezhda Galabova (Center of Advanced Studies, Sofia): A Married Couple In A Boat (To Say Nothing Of The Socialist Ideology): The Maritime Stories Of/ About Doncho and Julia Papazovs

Galina Zelenina (RGGU, Moscow): "We had nothing to do with *melukha*" vs. "we knew how to live": Late-Soviet Jews Defying, Using and Dealing with the System

Discussants: Juliane Fürst (University of Bristol) / Sebastian Lambertz (University of Cologne)

Panel IX: Institutionalized Practices and Individuals' Understandings of Late Socialism

Chair: Natasha Wilson (University College London)

Rory Archer (University of Graz): Workers' Understandings of Self-managing Institutions and Hierarchies in the Yugoslav Late Socialist Workplace

Miwako Okabe-Suzuki (Helsinki University): Envisioning Socialism in Late Socialism: Student Cabaret Group "Rat der Spötter" and the SED in Leipzig, 1958-1962

Courtney Doucette (Rutgers University): Glasnost and Socialist Renewal, 1986-1987

Discussants: Simon Huxtable (Loughborough University) / Volker Benkert (Arizona State University)

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Citation: Alexandra Oberländer. Review of *The Many Faces of Late Socialism: The Individual in the Eastern Bloc, 1953-1988*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

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