Soviet cosmologies and ontologies (1950s–1980s)

Editors' introduction

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The October Revolution has become an indispensable part of the world history of emancipation, as have the ethics and aesthetics of the Soviet avant-garde and the early Soviet cultural revolution. This period legitimized itself as a breakthrough towards a range of communist ontologies. However, the post-Stalinist Soviet period has largely been erased from the maps of communist imaginaries; one can find strong distrust of Soviet post-Stalinist history, thought, and sociality both in philosophy – in the texts of Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, as well as in the works of Sovietologists and Slavists. Yet the post-Stalinist period became crucial in articulating a range of new ontologies and new epistemic frameworks, including wholesale cosmological proposals.

The social modes constructing life and production in the conditions of socialism – labor, gender, economy, thought, culture, art, consciousness, the unconscious, language, etc. – manifest epistemes that are drastically different from the ones that function in the conditions of private economy, which allows us to argue that they have the potential to generate genuinely new pictures of the world. The cluster of articles gathered in this issue of the *Studies in Eastern European Thought* under the thematic title “Soviet Cosmologies and Ontologies”¹ attempt to make the case for various non-capitalist ontologies emerging not immediately after the Revolution or

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during the avant-garde cultural practices, but rather at the so called “mature” stage of socialism, which paradoxically happens to be socialism’s stage of stagnation at the same time. By studying these ontologies and the epistemological frameworks they became embedded in the existing paradigms of emancipatory theory and practice that have assumed canonical status in Continental thought since the 1960s.

Of course, a recent staple objection to all this has been to maintain that Soviet society was just as capitalist because its economy was also grounded in the production of surplus value, and consequently never really sublated class antagonisms. This, however, would invite pertinent questions: why, then, did this social formation have to be demolished under the pressure of the Cold War? And why did its citizens develop obsessive private fascination with Western capitalism’s benefits if they themselves already lived in capitalism? Discussions of state capitalism would not go very far in answering these questions; instead, we have to explore the haunting imaginaries of communism, developed both under socialism and in our capitalist societies as a mirror image of an ideal that never acquired ontologic certainty but continues to have explanatory potential through its own cosmologies, bringing together and mobilising as they do global visions of nature and of human history.

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