Concluding Thoughts

The Contributors

As a collective, we want to end this volume with a shared reflection on two key points: the place of ‘critical’ social science scholarship in the eastern European region, and an outline of some of the challenges it faces.

There is growing attention to recent developments in eastern Europe in terms of the region’s governance and government continuities with socialism, most notably some countries’ (re-)turn to authoritarianism, or similar hybrid models (Bugarič, 2019; Krastev, 2018). The notion that the region was ever transitioning to be like the West from the depths of state-socialist repressions and inefficiencies has been thoroughly problematised for its assumptions around the inevitability and path-dependent linearity of such a development trajectory, with the West setting the terms for what counts as ‘progression’. At the same time, any so-called transition to capitalism may be said to be well and truly over, as EE states have entirely neoliberalised their economies and public sectors, with political leaders keeping the spectre of and nostalgia for the socialist past alive as a “boogeyman”—as a threat that the socialist past could return—and thus using evolving interpretations of history as “disciplinary devices” (Chelcea and Druţă, 2016; Nadkarni, 2020).

The current populist, authoritarian turn in the region threatens democratic practices and foundations, including the terms on which any civil society may function. The forms and activities of the civil society sector underpin several chapters in this volume. Heightened antagonism from governments and state agencies towards civil groups may be part of a blanket policy of repression (as in Hungary, see Kovács and Pataki, Chapter 1; or for Poland see Szulecka and Szulecki, 2019), or specific to the environment sector, particular to identifiable protests or causes,
such as when environmental groups agitate to threaten or undermine a country’s energy policy (for some consideration of these relations in Czechia, see Novák, Chapter 2; and Černík, Chapter 3). Where ideas around environmentalism or conservation come from matters, as do the methods by which they are realised, because they influence local buy-in and perceived legitimacy (see Černík, Chapter 3; Hrckova, Chapter 4; Lubarda, Chapter 5; Püsök, Chapter 7; Iordâchescu, Chapter 8; Blumberg, Chapter 10; for (in)ability to ‘participate’ see Mihalovics, Chapter 12), and thus have significant consequences both for environmentalism and the vibrance (of participation or donor support) in any emerging ‘third’ sector.

As researchers, it can be challenging to write about eastern Europe and the political trajectory of some of its states without getting stuck on questions concerning ideology, and where researchers lie in relation to state-promulgated values and programmes. As reflective and engaged researchers, we need to consider the accusations of subjective bias that have come to plague the social sciences, which suggest that researchers’ political bias and personal circumstances are thought to influence analyses and research results.

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Many of the contributors of this edited book self-identify as local or ‘native’ scholars. We live amongst those we write about, where our research ‘field’ is also the place we call ‘home’, and the context where we take up active political roles to better understand and to elevate and represent particular causes and voices. The earlier chapters of this volume are the result of years of activism on behalf of their authors—Mikulás Černík in Chapter 3 terms his research process for this engagement ‘militant ethnography’—with most other chapters also engaging in and using the tools of participant observation. This approach requires long-term embeddedness and an emphasis on active participation. Together, we posit that it is important to wear these activities and commitments ‘on our sleeves’, and engaged ethnography ‘about home’ makes our research rigorous as well as epistemologically unique.

We are all in the challenging position of conducting research that at times can be read as critical of mainstream structures of power. Yet, we do not conflate disagreement with the values of governments or their
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policies (which may motivate research) with the research results, which may well be critical of those values. Critical research often investigates the provenance and promulgation of societal narratives, considering how they are mobilised as potential social engineering tools. Beyond the underpinnings and operations of state agendas, a strong regional research focus lies in the question of how state institutions fail to live up to (or institutionalise) the rule of law. Across eastern European contexts, state function decline is represented through the hollowing out of due process, legal regularity and predictability, including judicial independence and governmental transparency. Tied into these processes are myriad social consequences, not least the concretisation and (re-)normalisation of nepotistic pathways—who you know and how much money you have—to “live and get by” (Saitta et al., 2013).

These processes can be viewed through the evolving prisms of the state-citizen relationship, and the individual’s place within society.

These negotiations are not in any way confined to eastern Europe. Neoliberal models of agency make the individual responsible for everything (cf. Watts, 1994)—for themselves through their successes, as well as their downfalls. The individualisation of responsibility includes action around climate change and biodiversity loss, where these processes are not recognised as the outcomes of systems failure, as market forces are disembedded from social institutions (the Polányian critique of market society). With the collapse of socialism and the erosion of Keynesian welfare states, we would argue that there is a risk that we are all potentially headed in an increasingly authoritarian-neoliberal-oligarchic direction (Bohle and Greskovits, 2019).

Critical research that is attentive to the machinations of these ‘macro’ trends around state-prescribed individual responsibilities and rights, and for how these intersect with local realities and needs, is vital in this space and in this moment. Some of the many environmental consequences of this neoliberal-authoritarian turn have been canvassed and interrogated by chapter contributions to this book. Resource governance forms today share many parallels with the access politics of socialist times, with the elite and well-placed able to capitalise on their social networks to gain ownership and control. The region is replete with examples of local resources being controlled through mafia-like fiefdoms that reassert local hierarchies and contested roles and forms of the state (Thelen
et al., 2011): from fisheries, forests, and land, to agricultural subsidies (Dorondel, 2016; Gonda, 2019; Kovács, 2015; Schmidt and Theesfeld, 2012; Stahl, 2010; Vasile, 2019). Despite the entry of green discourses and pressures for better environmental management, environmental conditions have deteriorated throughout the region over the past three decades. The proliferation of private actors interested in extraction and profits, the increased mechanisation of all resource sectors, a panoply of enormous infrastructure and development projects majority-financed by the EU, and so on, have taken their toll. In addition, accession to the EU has meant the wholesale adoption across the continent of the most harmful environmental policy, the CAP, which has contributed to huge biodiversity losses and degradation in farmland quality, as the policy incentivises the intensification and mechanisation of agricultural activities (Mihók et al., 2017).

Various contributions to this volume make strong cases for how sustainable socio-environmental futures are threatened by local interpretations or realities of displacement and marginalisation (see Coțofană, Chapter 6; Püsök, Chapter 7; Iordăchescu, Chapter 8; for consideration of working landscapes with little space for local capital or practices see Brawner, Chapter 9; Dikovic, Chapter 11 and Mihalovics, Chapter 12 focus on differential local meanings and identities as they intersect with rural development). Yet, unsurprisingly, such research is amongst the first to be diminished. The relative lack of accessible, evidence-based internal societal critique in eastern Europe is a reflection, we argue, of the emerging public milieu, where even when outright (oppositional) critique may be found, there is no corresponding public movement to take it forward.

From the eastern European region, the most well-known attacks on independent thought and research ‘from within’ come from Hungary, as best illustrated through the fate of the Central European University in Budapest. In addition to this, the Hungarian government has mandated the removal of gender studies as a recognised degree, and by taking education and research institutions across the country (including the Hungarian Academy of Sciences) under government control, has redirected research fund bids. These recent developments give rise to serious concerns around the independence of the academic sector, as the relationship and service of research seems re-targeted to aid private
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actors. These changes also limit the scope and possibility of critical socio-political topics that might receive funding and inquiry.

A further reason for diminishing (or stagnant) quantity of critical social research are the realities of academic (and post-graduate) life within universities and research departments. Universities in EE, following the example of universities elsewhere, have been gradually neoliberalised over the past two decades. Universities today function as increasingly privatised, competitive business enterprises, as they are recast and expected to work in the state’s interests and contribute to its economic productivity—and cater to students who are classified as ‘paying customers’. The pressure to churn out degrees and focus on individual career achievements has come at the expense of rigorous, ‘slow’ scholarship and scholarship practiced as a community of participants. This is because resources (time and finances) for long-term, engaged action research are all the more difficult when required to fit alongside precarious teaching contracts, 300 students, and a lack of research funds. From several of our own experiences, many universities in the EE region fail to be meritocratic, as they continue to operate and reward scholarships and positions via nepotistic routes that speak to the ingrained hierarchies of the sector. There are also serious questions to pose and answer around the academic sector’s role in the emergence and consolidation of contemporary power hierarchies in the region.

Western academic models also need to be questioned and not necessarily emulated, as these education systems promote a self-centred, highly individualistic career trajectory that is non-cooperative and competitive, wherein hierarchy and attendant servility also pervade career pathways. The current academic status quo diminishes the actions and outcomes of research as well as early career researchers, as those with the ‘right’ connections and personalities to compete are again and again privileged and promoted, with many doctoral and graduate students falling by the wayside.

As scholars, it is furthermore important to continuously interrogate how we construct our critique. Scholarship and conversations around ‘decolonising knowledge’ recognise the eastern European region’s imperial/colonial past (Tlostanova, 2019), and highlight the difficulty of providing critique through language and through the views of those about whom we write, without recourse to the same canonised
Western orthodox theoretical frameworks and dogma. We find affinities with decolonial movements advocating to break with “familiar citational infrastructure” (Nagar, 2019: 5) and to submerge ourselves into the worlds of those about whom we write, and the values and things that are worth fighting for and preserving. In many ways, such an ethics and research mode presupposes “a shared hunger for an intense transformative engagement with social worlds that can inspire intellectual and political agitation by remaking how we locate ourselves in relation to the bodies, battles, wisdoms, and worlds among which we move, and that we represent and reimagine,” (ibid.: 22). To realise such novel positionalities and epistemological insights requires changes not only to our academic practice ‘in the workplace’, but also to our everyday lives, which must also embody solidarity. In this volume, such solidarity is solidified through the commitment to gather together a group of scholars from the region, to write about and for this region first and foremost, but also with the intention to reach colleagues and friends beyond it, in the hopes that the issues presented here resonate with other places. This commitment has thoroughly motivated our decision to publish with Open Book Publishers, particularly in light of widespread difficulties around research access (arising from institutional and financial factors) experienced by local scholars.

Perhaps due to our lives ‘on the ground’, from within the EE region, the prevailing winds are that of pessimism about the immediate future and about the possibilities for imagining, let alone realising, alternative and more hopeful futures. There has been a recent turn within geographical research to emphasise hope—or “emancipation” (Scoones et al., 2018)—as lights at the end of (or alongside) tunnels of authoritarian practices. These reinscribe somewhat linear expectations and ideas about progressivism, using a language and framework not grounded in most of our interlocuters’ prisms and worldviews, let alone our own personal experiences. However, the only way to understand the forms and possibilities of hope being realised is to engage and build wide-ranging communities and communities of practice, where researchers must act as cultural translators in the service of an environmental cause that is borderless and shared. This is where we find hope and situate our activist scholarship.
References


