COLD WAR IMPERIALISM AND AFTER: US ANTHROPOLOGY OF EASTERN EUROPE

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What does anthropological imperialism mean in the context of Cold-War superpower relations? To what extent was research by US anthropologists in the Soviet bloc comparable to that by anthropologists from colonial powers in their (former) colonies? What changes accompanied the end of the Cold War? Exploring these questions will contribute to better understanding whether US anthropology, for all its commitment to equality and justice, is itself a hegemonic force in the production of disciplinary knowledge in Eastern Europe, the area of my own research.

Let me begin by asking a question about structure: were US anthropologists who did ethnography behind the Iron Curtain part of a colonial structure? I think not. British and French anthropologists had ready access to field sites in British and French colonies (although they had to keep themselves out of trouble, as Max Gluckman’s example made clear). Likewise US anthropologists with Native Americans, many sequestered on reservations in an internal-colonial situation. But the Cold War was different: the US and Soviet camps faced one another as relative equals, and nobody from one side had privileged access to sites in the other. Each sent its scholars primarily through exchange programs that gave the host government the option of refusing them entry. During the Cold War, if they were colonies at all, East European countries were colonies of the Soviet Union, not of the US. Only the fact of US technological mastery tipped the balance, placing East European governments in the position of having to host US scholars they might have wanted to expel (such as me) in order that their own scholars could continue to have access to US scientific knowledge. Even with this qualifier, though, the situation of US anthropologists in, say, Hungary or Romania was not like that of US or British anthropologists in India or Latin America, beneficiaries of a colonial situation.

Imperial social structures are not the only way to think about anthropological imperialism, however. Let me illustrate with a 2004 paper by Michał Buchowski, “Hierarchies of Knowledge in Central-Eastern European Anthropology,” in which he criticizes western scholars who have worked in Central and Eastern Europe (henceforth, CEE) for not citing the work of indigenous scholars, engaging with them intellectually, or including them in edited volumes. Why, he asks, was/is there not greater overlap of the scholarly discourses of, and fruitful dialogue between, CEE-style ethnography and that of the West?—what I have elsewhere called “Franglus” anthropology (that is, Franco-Anglo-US). Buchowski sees this neglect as a symptom of a colonial attitude, marked by a sense of intellectual superiority. I am sympathetic to the critique, for I acknowledge with regret
that when I first went to Romania as an ambitious graduate student, I felt intellectually superior to my Romanian ethnographer-colleagues even while recognizing that they had a wealth of knowledge I lacked about Romanian life-ways. But they didn’t have “theory,” and that’s what I had been trained to care about.

A word about context. In CEE, there was no equivalent to western-style socio-cultural anthropology before or during the socialist period. Instead, there were ethnography and folklore in the tradition of the German Volkskunde/Völkerkunde. “Anthropology” was likely to mean physical anthropology. Hungarian ethnographer Tamás Hofer (1968) and US anthropologists Joel Halpern and Eugene Hammel (1969) contrast the Western and Eastern European ethnographic traditions by distinguishing the place of ethnography in an empire-building colonial project (Franglus) from that in a nation-building project (CEE). (This is not to say that Germany did not also have colonial ambitions—and in CEE, at that—but these did not take the form of German ethnographers coming to would-be CEE colonies, as Franglus anthropologists did.) The colonial context enabled Franglus anthropologists to study “Others” and encouraged knowledge that was comparative (from different colonies) and theoretical (creating models that might apply in other colonial settings). Franglus anthropology emerged well after the consolidation of west European national states; it could play little role in nation-building. By contrast, the national ethnography that developed in Eastern Europe was quite different. It took shape together with the creation of national states across the region, as 19th-century movements of national liberation threw off Ottoman, Russian, Prussian, and Habsburg overlords. New elites built up national cultures by looking to the “folk” to reveal the nation’s original character. For this purpose, neither comparison nor theory-creation was useful; it required, instead, close description of local traditions toward creating new national states.

To overstate the situation: Franglus anthropology was the creation of scholars connected to overseas colonizers, CEE ethnography that of scholars emerging from Europe’s colonized peoples (the Hungarians, Romanians, Czechs and others who had risen up against their Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian rulers). Differences of emphasis were inevitable; it is scarcely surprising that there was not much overlap of these discourses and that dialogue was difficult, as Buchowski rightly claims. In my own case, dialogue was harder with the folklorists than with representatives of the famous school of Romanian rural sociology, developed by Dimitrie Gusti in the 1930s. Part of the reason was, again, the Gusti School’s commitment to a theoretical apparatus that organized ethnographic material, in the form either of Gusti’s own set of conceptual frameworks for understanding social processes or of his colleague, the outstanding marxist sociologist Henri Stahl, who used his ethnography to theorize about tributary modes of production.
To observe that “theory” has hegemonic effects will surprise no one who has noted the hierarchies established even within US anthropology, between theoretically driven and descriptive work, between academic and “applied” or “practicing” anthropology, not to mention more generally in the sciences—between theoretical and experimental physics, and so on. We judge grant proposals, articles, and books by their theoretical sophistication and accord top “star” status to those among us who have theoretical flair. Theory provides meta-languages that float free of the quotidian, enabling generalization and comparison: nomothetic (law-stating) rather than idiographic (specifying). Why theory plays this role in the field of knowledge production is beyond my scope here, though it goes back at least to Plato’s view that truth has something to do with getting at the abstract essence of things, not their surface forms. In anthropology I think it has something to do with our discipline’s derivation from medicine and law, as well as from the effort by Malinowski and others to institutionalize it as a science, employing scientific practices.

My characterization here lacks nuance, for as Chelcea has observed, both Malinowski and US anthropology were significantly influenced by German philological and social-science traditions, so the contrast I have drawn is too stark. But overall, I would maintain that during the Cold War, “Franglus” anthropology’s concern with theory inhibited collegial interaction with the ideographs of CEE ethnography and folklore, deeply committed to the particular. This theoretical imperialism was not the product of an imperial Cold-War structure but of different intellectual traditions rooted in the larger set of 19th century imperial relations in Europe, traditions that saw different sorts of problems as important. While I acknowledge that we US anthropologists could be somewhat dismissive of the problems pursued by East European ethnographers, this attitude worked both ways. Tamas Hofer observed caustically, for instance, that western anthropologists worked with a “slash and burn” mentality, in contrast to the depth and greater specialist expertise with which “native” ethnographers cultivated the landscape. Colleagues in the Bucharest Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, where I was assigned, were appalled at the scale of my proposed dissertation research, which they thought would require the efforts of numerous scholars over a lengthy period.

What about developments since the collapse of communism in 1989? These occur in a frame that is decidedly neo-colonial, within the wholesale imposition of western political and economic forms, mostly through EU enlargement. Does this mean that Franglus anthropology is a tool of empire as it was in those earlier colonies? Are “western anthropologists” now imposing their discipline upon CEE? This is a complex question, into which Peter Skalník’s edited book The Struggles for Sociocultural Anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe offers unexpected insights.
These contributors (all from CEE) tell us that Franglus anthropologists are not trying to impose their anthropology on CEE: rather, the impetus comes from CEE scholars trying to import it. According to these papers, the postsocialist era offers an opportunity for would-be anthropologists in CEE to achieve upward mobility and to gain access to western benefits such as grants, trips abroad, etc., by building up western-style anthropology as a symbol of “democratization.” There have been two main forms of doing so, the book argues. In one, some “native” ethnographers began calling themselves “anthropologists” or, at least, ethnologists; they did some reading and then created programs in anthropology (or, sometimes, ethnology) that did not differ much from what they were doing before. In the second, local scholars from various disciplines who had already been reading Franglus anthropology, or who returned home with Ph.D.’s from Franglus universities, tried to set up their own anthropology programs, labeling those older ethnographers “false anthropologists.” Unsurprisingly, battles over “authenticity” ensued, to establish whose anthropology was “correct.” In the fierce competition to set up anthropology programs, rivals—each claiming to be the only backers of “real” anthropology—sought to draw in Franglus anthropologists for help with syllabi, books, short courses, fellowships, invitations to visit, etc. Representatives of traditional ethnography, however, have resisted this move: nearly all the papers in Skalník’s book complain how difficult it is to institutionalize Franglus anthropology and create jobs in it, against the opposition of already-entrenched native ethnographers. Skalník’s report of his own futile efforts to build Franglus anthropology in the Czech and Slovak republics is particularly revealing.

I myself was asked to participate in building anthropology at the university in the Romanian city of Cluj, and I attended several meetings there in the Sociology Department, which had initiated the new program. (At one meeting, someone commented—only partly in jest—that the actual content of the program really didn’t matter; the point was for their program, instead of the proposed programs in the universities of Timisoara, Iași, and Bucharest, to capture the symbol “anthropology” and to gain academic allies in “the West.”) There were three main contenders for creating anthropology in Cluj: an out-of-favor old-regime sociologist looking for a new source of status; the head of the Ethnography Institute, who had long experience of excellent work in that tradition but not much exposure to Franglus anthropology; and the new head of the Sociology Department, who appointed a largely self-taught young woman with extensive reading in contemporary Franglus anthropology. The university rector backed her and encouraged her further training, but during her studies abroad, the head of the Ethnography Institute took over her position. As things developed, I was struck by how specific the outcome was to a chance
combination of local alliances, timing, personal talents, and risk-taking. In other Romanian cities the anthropology being built would be different, based in different constellations of disciplinary and personal relations.

This experience prepared me for the picture painted by Skalnik’s collaborators, who show us multiple “anthropologies” in Eastern Europe, all weakly institutionalized, and shaped differently in the different countries as a function of the departments from which the new programs are emerging and the disciplines of those attempting to create them (sociology, philology, philosophy, ethnography, history, etc.). Even different universities within a single CEE country have different anthropologies, the result of local fields of power in the various cities and in their universities.

But a constant across all these fields is that EU membership and adherence to the “Bologna” program of higher education now makes publication in international circles imperative. The imperialism is of the European “center,” not the US, but it exposes East European scholars to peripheralization in the publishing business, dominated by reviewers who adhere to the “Franglus” style rather than to the more eclectic mix of some East European intellectuals. The fact that increasing numbers of US academic presses are cutting back on monographs will make it difficult for East Europeans to publish their books here—but so will younger US scholars as well. The “business” of learning has turned against all of us, not just those from Eastern Europe. Once again, then, I find that one can identify imperialism only in a qualified sense in the relation between anthropologists from western core countries and those from Eastern Europe, many trained in Franglus universities. Such initiatives are better understood in terms of local power struggles within a globally hegemonic vision of anthropology whose hegemony has many sources.

Let me close by citing my Romanian colleague Enikő Magyari-Vincze, who was supposed to be here today. While she acknowledges the colonial history of socio-cultural anthropology, she prefers to emphasize its potential for empowering local anthropologies at the peripheries. Institutionalizing anthropology as a form of post-colonial critique, these local scholars have used it to criticize and outmanoeuvre both the older ethnographic tradition and positivist sociology. In her view, even though local anthropologists find it increasingly difficult to compete on the academic market, they have increasing potential as critics of current power regimes. If they are disadvantaged both in their own academic contexts and on the market of global anthropology, the reason is not anthropological imperialism but larger structures of professional inequality embedded in global inequalities—which, I would add, affect US anthropology as well. I can only second Enikő’s call for all anthropologists to join in combatting our collective marginalization.