

Utopia after Utopia

Final Project Report

Our group met for a two-day faculty workshop on March 4-5, 2016. Present were six Yale faculty members: Marijeta Bozovic (Slavic), Molly Brunson (Slavic), Marta Figlerowicz (Comparative Literature and English), Doug Rogers (Anthropology), Marci Shore (History), and Laura Wexler (WGSS and American Studies), two graduate student co-organizers: Julia Chan (English) and Fabrizio Fenghi (Slavic) as well as seven guests from other institutions in other parts of the United States and abroad: Agnieszka Graff (Uniwersytet Warszawski), Magdalena Grabowska (Polska Akademia Nauk), Mitja Velikonja (Ljubiana University), Aniko Imre (UCS), Susan Gal (U Chicago), Stephanie Sandler (Harvard University), and Serguei Oushakine (Princeton University).

The workshop proceeded as a series of half-hour talks followed by brief responses and question and answer sessions. Our schedule was as follows:

Friday, March 4

10:00-11:00 — Susan Gal: “Illiberal democracy as everyday practice (Hungary):

Hollowing out discourses and institutions,” with a response from Doug Rogers

11:00-12:00 — Aniko Imre: “The Soap Opera of the Cold War,” with a response from

Laura Wexler

12:00 – 2:00 — lunch break, catered lunch provided

2:00-3:00 — Magdalena Grabowska: “From peperówka to aktywistka. The

transformation of gender politics and aesthetics in post 1945 and post 1989

Poland,” with a response from Marci Shore

3:00-4:00 — Agnieszka Graff: “Worse than Communism and Nazism put together: War

on Gender in Poland,” with a response from Marta Figlerowicz

4:00-5:00 — Mitja Velikonja: “Between Collective Memory and Political Action:

Emancipative Potentials of Yugo-nostalgia in Post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina,”

with a response from Marijeta Bozovic

Saturday, March 5

10:00-11:00 — Stephanie Sandler: “Crimes in Paradise, or Danger and Pleasure in the Poetry of Lida Yusupova,” with a response from Molly Brunson

11:00-12:00 — Fabrizio Fenghi: “Envisioning a Post-Historical Russian Empire: Aleksandr Dugin’s Eurasia Movement as an Aesthetic-Political Project,” with a response from Serguei Oushakine

12:00 – 2:00 — lunch break, catered lunch provided

2:00-3:30 — Final Roundtable

3:30-5:30 — closing reception in Bingham Hall

Each of the papers presented offered a substantial intervention into our general understanding of the contemporary state of Eastern European and Russian politics, as well as of recent critical and aesthetic responses to it. Agnieszka Graff presented on the homophobic and transphobic misuse of gender theory by Polish right-wing movements. Magdalena Grabowska contextualized this current political situation by examining the relatively forgotten Polish feminist movements of the twenties and thirties. Mitja Velikonja discussed expressions of nostalgia for this communist past in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina. Aniko Imre considered the way in which popular perceptions of and responses to Soviet-inflected socialism were shaped, across Eastern Europe, by television programming with a particular emphasis on soap operas. Susan Gal spoke from a more theoretical perspective about the way right-wing parties in Hungary have recently been adopting postmodern modes of political critique to conservative ends. Stephanie Sandler introduced us to the sexually subversive poetry of Lida Yusupova. Fabrizio Fenghi (who stepped in for Serguei Oushakine) presented his recent research on extreme right-wing groups in contemporary Russia. In their responses, our local faculty wove these presentations together and extrapolated from them a series of more general conceptual questions.

These presentations led to a series of formal and informal discussions, culminating in a two-hour roundtable on Saturday afternoon. Below we summarize the three main shared areas of debate that this event opened for us.

Evil twin theory

We were all surprised to see how often the post-socialist right co-opts for its own purposes originally leftist forms of critique. For instance, in Poland, the extreme right has been engaging in a systematic deconstruction of the term ‘gender.’ In Hungary and in Russia, right-wing parties have been using similar rhetorical strategies, to the point of

developing theoretical gurus vaguely styled after the stars of Western European poststructuralism. We discussed similarities between this phenomenon and the Western phenomena described by Bruno Latour in “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”: it seems that they are part of a general cultural phenomenon comparable to the previous century’s rise of fascism within and out of the futurist moment. At the same time, there are many specificities of Post-Socialist countries—and of our various critical positions within or toward them—that need to be taken into account in comparisons such as these. We debated the potentially imperialist implications of comparing these movements to forms of critique that were most popular in the West a few decades ago, and that many Western critics believe themselves to have already surpassed. We also wondered how our own status and self-awareness as critical theorists should be affected by the high degree to which we now share our tools of critique even with groups to which we might consider our own scholarly practice to be diametrically opposed. Even a few decades ago, it seemed that methodology itself was a crucial point of difference between leftist scholarship and politics (inflected by critical theory) and right-wing ones (inflected by philology and a more literalist sense of history). Now that this methodological difference is being eradicated, how can we be sure of the politics of our own critical practice? What would a confidently leftist (or even a politically neutral) method or perspective look like?

To reflect on this question, Marijeta half-humorously coined the notion of a possible “evil twin” of our faculty workshop: what if, somewhere else in America, or elsewhere, another group were concurrently exploring similar cultural phenomena, using similar methods, but with a right-wing bent? What would a right-wing critical account of contemporary culture look like, and how can it be meaningfully differentiated from our own? What started out as a joke became one of our central metaphors for the depth of the challenges that these recent political and critical developments pose not just for critical analysis, but for our definition of critique in and of itself.

Grandmothers

“Who are your grandmothers?” Agnieszka Graff asked Magdalena Grabowska early on in the workshop. Agnieszka was interrogating Magdalena’s particular influences as a feminist, but we continued to return to more general versions of this question throughout our meetings. At issue was not just the familiar Foucaultian question of genealogy, but also the political assumptions that underlie it.

For Michel Foucault—as, earlier, for Friedrich Nietzsche—the purpose of genealogical analysis is to unearth and expose the unsavory politics behind what might otherwise seem to be politically neutral or even progressive ideas. A basic, if frequently unspoken premise of this mode of analysis is that discovering a questionable historical underpinning to a contemporary phenomenon taints this phenomenon more or less

irrevocably. For instance, in Nietzsche, Christianity cannot philosophically recover from its supposed origins as ‘slave morality.’

In our own genealogical investigations, we continued to come across potential counterarguments to this mode of reasoning. What does it mean—asked Magdalena Grabowska, Mitja Velikonja, and others—to admit that one looks back to relatively conservative or repressive moments in one’s cultural past with much nostalgia? To what extent is this nostalgia justifiable, and how can it be deployed self-critically in an analysis of the present? In Eastern Europe and in Russia, this question is, of course, particularly fraught because of their post-socialist political context. Many of our current leftist ideals emerged out of old ideologies that might otherwise have seemed opposed to or at least not very hospitable to them. Many contemporary leftists from the former Second World have to face up to the historical failures of socialism and communism with a directness and sense of entanglement that Western thinkers can arguably never quite approximate. We saw this context as a paradoxical critical affordance: an opportunity to rethink both our own leftist heritage, and the purpose of genealogical thinking in general.

The shock of simultaneity

The Internet loomed large over our workshop both as a critical affordance and as a critical challenge. On the one hand, we were pressingly aware that without online communication and the digitized spread of academic scholarship, a workshop such as ours might never have taken place at all. Coming from many different countries and academic traditions, we had frequently found out about each other’s work, and become interested in it, through its online dissemination. More basically, much of the research we do, especially those of us who are concerned with very contemporary cultural production, would not be possible at all without social media and the possibilities for interpersonal networking and global communication that they offer. We also discussed the ways in which, for the writers and artists we study, the Internet has become not just a medium of dissemination, but also a medium of aesthetic *creation*. Many of the artifacts and performances we discussed were made specifically for online audiences, within genres and with cultural expectations that recent social media first made possible.

On the other hand, the rise of online media also creates its own critical difficulties. First, the amount of recent cultural production potentially available to a researcher—even to a scholar of Russia alone—has come to vastly exceed any single person’s cognitive capacities. More pressingly than ever, we have become faced with, and aware of, our extreme limitations as researchers and the potentially very insular kind of insight we might be able to provide into our fields of study. Second, the vast and deeply hierarchical networks of online dissemination have paradoxically made it harder—not easier—to find and highlight marginalized work that is nevertheless worthy

of popular attention and critical scrutiny. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, the Internet has deepened preexisting problems of critical distance and perspective through the near-simultaneity with which it allows post-socialist and capitalist milieus and scholars to maintain contact with each other. Even a century ago, the dissident poets of Russia did not become popular beyond a small coterie following, until decades after their death. Now, as American academics, we are able to get in touch with artists and writers of similar local stature in real time; we can frequently even invite them to present at our home institution. This increased capacity for immediate communication makes more evident the kind of cultural baggage and mutual stereotypes that both sides of these exchanges bring into them. We debated the ways in which all these challenges might require us to alter our current critical methods, and further rethink the perspectives and assumptions with which we approach such trans-continental comparative scholarly work.

Next steps

As can be seen from this report, we found the workshop to be extremely fruitful and thought-provoking. We remain grateful to the Whitney Humanities Center for making it possible. The conclusions we drew from this event were wide-ranging and broadly theoretical in nature. In addition to helping us understand the particularities of recent political and aesthetic developments in Russia and Eastern Europe, our conversations raised questions about political and conceptual challenges and opportunities currently faced by left-leaning critical theory as a whole. Toward the end of the workshop, we all agreed that these questions would merit more extended theoretical treatment, and more public exposure. To this end, we are currently in the process of putting together a group of articles from this event's participants and other scholars that we will propose as a special issue to journals such as *October*, *Representations*, *The New Left Review*, or *Critical Inquiry*.