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Multicase Ethnography

Tracking the Demise of State Socialism

One of the most insistent laments of my teacher, the anthropologist Jaap van Velsen, was aimed at Marxists who damned capitalism with utopian socialism. This, he averred, was a false comparison, comparing the reality of one society with an idealization of another. He demanded a comparison of like with like—actually existing capitalism must be compared with actually existing socialism. Comparing the reality of one society with the utopian version of another was a categorical mistake. It was irresponsible of Marxists to let the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe off the hook. His voice boomed all the louder as Marxism became the fashion in the 1970s. When I completed my own study of the capitalist labor process based on eleven months of working as a machine operator in a south Chicago manufacturing plant (Burawoy 1979), he targeted his wrath at me. He was right: lurking behind my text was an unspecified utopian socialism, the hidden foundation of my critique of capitalism.

His remonstrations were enjoined by Robert Merton, who reproached me for the false imputation that mistakes industrialism for capitalism. He was criticizing an essay I wrote in 1982 about the industrial sociology of his recently deceased student Alvin Gouldner. I claimed that Gouldner's classic, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954), missed the specifically capitalist character of industrial bureaucracy (Burawoy 1982). His mock bureaucracy and his punishment-centered bureaucracy were both shaped by the exigencies of wage labor and the competitive pursuit of profit, while his representative bureaucracy was simply unrealizable in capitalism. Merton responded by saying that I had not demonstrated my claims, which would require comparisons of industrial bureaucracy both within and between capitalist and noncapitalist societies.

To atone for my sins of false comparison and false imputation, I resolved to take actually existing socialism far more seriously. I decided against the easy road of Western Marxism, which dismissed the Soviet Union and its satellites as a form of statism or state capitalism, unrelated to the socialist project. Instead I began a twenty-year journey into the hidden abode of actually existing socialism, the last ten years of which were unexpectedly devoted to following the painful Soviet transition to capitalism. Ironically, in evaluating this Soviet leap into capitalism—the experiments of shock therapy and big bang—I now turned the tables on the avatars of market freedoms. I accused them of false comparisons, as they damned the realities of socialism with an idealization of capitalism, and of false imputations as they assumed the pathologies of Soviet societies would evaporate if its socialist character were destroyed. They forgot the transition costs, all the higher in a global order dominated by capitalism, as

well as capitalism's very own pathologies. The economists thought they were shopping in a supermarket and could just grab whatever combination of institutions they wanted and then walk out without even paying. Indeed, the Russian transition proved to be looting on a grand scale. After being under the heel of state socialism, the population at large colluded in this unrestrained expropriation, to its own detriment. To be sure, Russians never saw themselves in a supermarket but in a prison. They had been there all their life, so they assumed that life on the outside could only be better. For many it turned out to be another sort of prison.

The life-and-death costs of a capitalist transition, guided and justified by such false comparisons and false imputations, were no less horrific than those borne of similar errors during the period of agriculture's collectivization and the planned economy. Just as Stalinism eclipsed its atrocities by proclaiming the new order as the realization of "communism" and by imputing perversions to pernicious capitalist legacies, so the neoliberal economists hid the horrors of the capitalist transition behind the labels of the "free market" while imputing perversions to the obdurate inheritance of communism or totalitarianism. Behind the social science errors of false comparison and false imputation there lies a mountain of political (ir)responsibility and guilt.

In this essay I reflect on my own attempts to grapple with the challenges of comparison and imputation in a journey that, in the 1980s, took me from workplace to workplace in Hungary and, then, in the 1990s, from workplace to community in Russia's market transition. What was peculiar, I asked, to work organization and working-class consciousness in the "workers' state," that is, under actually existing socialism, and with what

consequences for the demise of the old order and the genesis of the new? And now I must also ask, what are the lasting lessons we can draw from socialism-as-it-was?

THE MULTICASE METHOD

How does an ethnographer compare capitalism and socialism without falling into the traps of false comparisons and false imputations? The old-style anthropologist, alone in his village, focuses on the here and now and, cut off from the world beyond, has little to offer. No better is the old-style symbolic interactionist or ethnomethodologist, working with the minutiae of face-to-face social interaction, searching for formal theory in social process, suspending both time and space, suppressing the historical contexts of capitalism and socialism.

Breaking out of these traditional genres of ethnography, seeking to grasp social meaning in the age of globalization, is the appealing idea of multisited ethnography—ethnography that connects different sites across national boundaries. Multisited ethnography sets out from a rejection of classical anthropology's spatial incarceration of the native, immobilized within and confined to a single place (Appadurai 1988). It rejects the enforced coincidence of space, place, and culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Today borderlands, migration, cultural differences within communities, and the postcolonial condition all point to ties and identities that have to be explored across and among multiple locales. In one of the early programmatic statements George Marcus (1995) regarded multisited ethnography as the way to get inside the process of globalization rather than seeing it as an external system imposing itself on the life-world. He catalogues

the techniques of multisited ethnography: tracing the movement of people as in the study of immigration; following the flow of things as in commodity chains or the spread of cultural artifacts; discovering the changing manifestations of metaphor as in Emily Martin's notion of flexibility; or unraveling a story, as in the pursuit of social memory or the trajectory of life histories across boundaries.

Multisited ethnography works well in following flows, associations, and linkages across national boundaries, but it is still marked by a reaction to conventional anthropology. Just as the village or the tribe used to be a "natural" entity, so now the "site," albeit connected to other sites, speaks for itself as a natural essence that reveals itself through investigation. Abandoning the idea of a preexisting site, I turn to cases, that is, from natural empirical objects to theoretically constructed objects. We have to be self-conscious about the theory we bring to the site that turns it into a case of something—in this chapter a capitalist factory or socialist factory. What is a factory? What is a capitalist factory? What is a socialist factory? These are not innocent questions whose answers emerge spontaneously from the data but come packaged in theoretical frameworks.

Constituting distinct sites as cases of something leads us to thematize their difference rather than their connection, which, then, poses questions of how that difference is produced and reproduced, in other words, how capitalist and socialist factories are different and then how that difference is produced and reproduced. Instead of the connection of sites to examine networks or flows, we have the comparison of cases constituted with a view to understanding and explaining their difference. Instead of multisited ethnography we have multicase ethnography. In short, the

"case" is doubly constituted: realistically by the social forces within which it is embedded and the social processes it expresses, and imaginatively by the position we hold in the field and the theoretical framework we bring to bear. Only then, when we have constituted the case, can we think about connections.

Following the principles of the extended case method that I outlined in previous chapters, I begin with factories in specific places, a factory in the United States and one in Hungary, but then the factories have to be constituted as cases reflecting the worlds in which they are situated—the worlds of capitalism and socialism. The factories have to be rooted in their broader political and economic context, in the field of social forces of which they are a product. This is the first step, to see the microprocesses as an expression of macrostructures. The second step is to recognize the dynamics of change within each order. Capitalism and socialism are not static orders but dynamic societies, and in comparing the two we have to pay attention to how they change over time. But not only over time—over space, too. We have to recognize both the changes that take place within factories and the variety of factories that can be found within each system—complexities expressive of the character of each order. Just as there is not a singular capitalist factory, so there is not a singular socialist factory. Thus each case dissolves into multiple subcases from which we reconstruct what they have in common, what makes them part of a capitalist or socialist order.

So much for the realist dimension of comparison—the real forces and social processes at work that comprise the case. But there is also a constructivist dimension to comparison. Any complex site looks different from different places within it. A factory, whether capitalist or socialist, looks very different

according to whether we take the standpoint of the manager or the worker, just as a village looks different through the eyes of Dalits or Brahmins. As ethnographers we don't have access to some Archimedean standpoint; we are always inserted somewhere in the site, which has grave consequences for what we see. Even the "outsider within" is a distinctive place with distinctive properties—blindnesses as well as illuminations. Moreover, once inserted into a specific location, the competences of the ethnographer play a crucial role in how she or he is viewed and in turn views others. Some attributes are learned while others are ascribed. Depending on the specific context, race, gender, age all affect the way others see a person and interact with that person. I call this first constructivist dimension *positionality*. In making comparisons among factories, it is important to recognize the embodiment and biography of the ethnographer as well as his or her location. Positionality, as I will show, is important in the constitution of the case.

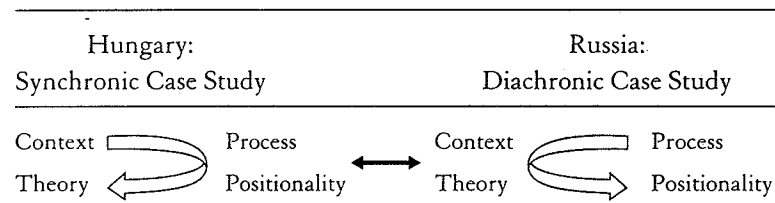
The second constructivist moment refers to the theoretical suppositions and frameworks necessary to make sense of our sites. All three moments—context, process, and positionality—are heavily saturated with theory. The very categories of context, capitalism and socialism, presume a theoretical framework of some sort. The dynamics of such systems, that is, social processes, cannot be examined empirically without understanding potential internal variation, and this requires previous conceptualization. Even comprehending the significance of position is not simply an empirical problem, since significance is also theory laden—significance for what? Indeed, we might say that theory is necessary to keep us steady within the field, giving us bearings on our positionality. To put it more generally and

Table 6. *Four Moments of the Multicase Method*

	Exogenous	Endogenous
Realist	Context	Process
Constructivist	Theory	Positionality

bluntly, the world is complex: We cannot see anything without lenses that make it possible to focus. We carry around lenses that are so much a part of us that we don't notice we have them, yet as social scientists our task is to bring those lenses to consciousness, compare one with another, and to develop from them other more detachable lenses, which we call social theory, so that we can get on with the business of studying the world. Theory is an inescapable moment in the discovery and constitution of the difference between capitalism and socialism.

It is impossible to concentrate on all four moments of comparative ethnography at the same time, so it is necessary to proceed moment by moment, from case study to case study, but in such a way that each step responds to anomalies created by the previous steps. The cases do not spring ready-made, like a phoenix out of the ashes, but develop through successive approximation. The Hungarian case studies, trying to grapple with the peculiarities of socialist working-class consciousness and work organization, are based on synchronic comparisons with capitalism. I move from context to process and from process to positionality and finally to theory. The Russian case studies are a diachronic analysis of the transition to capitalism. They proceed in the opposite direction: from process to context and from there to theory and finally to positionality. In both sets of studies the realist analysis precedes the constructivist analysis, but each moment always

Table 7. *The Trajectory of Successive Case Studies*

presupposes the necessary existence of the other three moments. The two sets of studies diverge in the order in which the moments are problematized, but each enters serially into dialogue with the others as, indeed, do the two series themselves.

The ethnographer is not a lone figure, observing the natives in isolation, recording their every move in his private notebook. The ethnographer is in dialogue not only with the participants but with various informants and collaborators, active participants in the process of construction and reconstruction. Here I am drawing on the plot of Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977), which traces the anthropologist's dialogue with a succession of informants, as he moved from periphery to the center, moving from superficial to deeper truths. In contrast to Rabinow, however, I make no presumption of increasing depth as ethnographer engages with collaborator or adversary, nor is there the separation of the dialogic process between informant and observer from the scientific process, which is a second dialogue between theory and data, the dialogue within the academic community. They work together—the two dialogues are themselves in dialogue. From beginning to end dialogue is the essence of this reflexive approach to ethnography.

SEARCHING FOR SOCIALISM IN HUNGARY

I had already turned my attention to the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe when Poland was struck by the Solidarity movement (August 12, 1980–December 13, 1981). This, or so it appeared to me, was the first society-wide revolutionary working-class movement. Why should it take place in a “communist” society rather than a “capitalist” society? I watched with amazement as the movement unfolded, sweeping more and more of Polish society into its orbit, refusing to succumb to the party-state as other such movements before it had done—East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968. I had recently completed *Manufacturing Consent*, which had sought to demonstrate that the Marxist anticipation of working-class revolution under capitalism was stymied not at the level of superstructures—education, ideology, state, and the like—but in the workplace, that is, in the very place where it was supposed to congeal.

My south Chicago ethnography, based on eleven months of working at Allied in 1974–75, draws out a model of advanced capitalism in which “hegemony was born in the factory,” and consent was produced by the very way that work was organized and regulated. Work was constituted as an absorbing game that eclipsed the conditions of its existence: the internal labor market and grievance machinery constituted workers as individuals ready to play games, while the internal state coordinated the interests of those individuals with those of management in the pursuit of profit. Could it be that work was organized and regulated differently in Eastern Europe, so much so that dissent rather than consent was the product? This was the abiding question that

motivated the succession of comparative factory studies. It began as a comparison of my own experiences in the United States with those of Miklós Haraszti in Hungary, and it continued as an examination of the specificity of Haraszti's experience as a factory worker, based on studies conducted first by others and then by myself.

Context: Advanced Capitalism versus State Socialism¹

It was with amazement that in 1979 I read Miklós Haraszti's *A Worker in a Worker's State* (1977). A dissident who in 1971–72 had been punished by the state with factory labor, Haraszti turned this to his advantage by writing a moving and detailed account of his experiences at Red Star Tractor Factory. But it was serendipity that found us in different parts of the world yet in similar machine shops of enterprises that produced similar vehicles, using similar technology. I immediately recognized the array of mills, drills, and lathes that surrounded him, but whereas I was a miscellaneous machine operator, which meant I moved from one machine to another, Haraszti was riveted to the two mills that he ran simultaneously. We both worked on a piece rate system that paid workers for how much they produced. Indeed, the original Hungarian version of *A Worker in a Worker's State* was called *Piece Rates*. In both factories workers were divided into operatives, like ourselves, who ran the machines, and auxiliary workers who facilitated production—clerks, inspectors, truck drivers, set-up men, and so forth, who could be the bane of our lives.

What was extraordinary to my capitalist eye was the intensity of work under Hungary's socialism. I estimated that Haraszti

was actually working, and was supposed to be working, twice as hard as my co-operators at Allied. He had to run two mills at once, whereas that was unheard-of at Allied. Now there was the puzzle—if there was one right that state socialist workers had won, it was the right not to work hard. Or so conventional wisdom had it. To be sure, there was the socialist competition and the Stakhanovite movement of the 1930s, but now with full employment workers never feared loss of job and thereby commanded considerable power on the shop floor. So how come Haraszti was working so much harder than I had?

My first answer to this question lay in the political economy of advanced capitalism and state socialism. I dissected Haraszti's representation of his lived experience in order to compare it with my own. He lived under the oppressive rule of the foreman, the party, and the trade union as well as petty clerical staff. He was subjected to what I called bureaucratic despotism. All this was so different from the hegemonic regime of Allied, where the trade union was a guardian of the rule of law, enforced the contract, and administered a grievance machinery that protected the rights of individuals. At Allied there was an "internal state," but it was not the arbitrary exercise of power that Haraszti faced. Rather, it was a regulated form of power that possessed a measure of legitimacy and elicited consent to the factory order. Moreover, the internal labor market gave workers with seniority the opportunity to move away from hated bosses by simply bidding on other jobs. Haraszti had no such escape hatch.

But what had Haraszti to fear? Why did he work so hard, how was he forced to run two machines at once? Answering this question requires going beyond the regulatory order of

bureaucratic despotism to its material basis, the piece-rate system. The hegemonic regime under which I labored guaranteed a minimum wage so that if the rate for a job was impossible, we were still assured a reasonable wage. This economic security gave rise to two types of output restriction: goldbricking when we took it easy on a difficult job because we were guaranteed a minimum wage unattainable on the basis of piece rates, and quota restriction in which we collectively agreed to adhere to a maximum of 140 percent so that management would not be alerted to gravy jobs. At Red Star, on the other hand, there was no minimum wage, no security against speed-up. There was therefore no goldbricking but neither was there quota restriction, because the setting of piece rates had no rhyme or reason, and workers engaged in no collective enforcement of a ceiling on output. Haraszti was defenseless against the dictatorship of the norm; he could not establish counternorms to protect against the intensification of work. Bureaucratic despotism pulverized the workforce, making wages dependent on a battle with the norm, so workers could not develop any countervailing power. At Allied, on the other hand, the security offered by minimum wage, unemployment compensation, and an elaborate bumping system that protected workers against layoffs called forth a hegemonic order in which managers had to coax and bribe rather than coerce workers into the expenditure of labor. Workers were allowed to organize work as a game of making out, and the game turned life on the shop floor from arduousness and boredom into an exciting challenge to the operator's ingenuity, measuring his status by the success with which he met but did not exceed management's output targets.

In describing these regimes of production I was also explaining their divergent politics. In the case of hegemony workers were constituted as individual citizens with rights and obligations, and because of rewards to seniority and collective bargaining their economic interests were coordinated with those of the enterprise. Instead of galvanizing opposition, capitalism elicited the consent of its exploited toilers. In the case of bureaucratic despotism, workers faced the arbitrary power of the state in the form of a collusive arrangement of management, trade union, and party. Workers responded to palpable exploitation and repression by carving out secretive realms of autonomy and creativity—Haraszti's "homer"—that could burst forth in a rebellion against the entire political system, as it did in 1953, 1956, and 1968. State socialism, I concluded, seemed more vulnerable to working-class rebellion than advanced capitalism. The following year Solidarity would demonstrate precisely my point, or so it seemed.

Social Process: Variations in Despotism and Hegemony²

This was the first step in developing a comparison of actually existing socialism and advanced capitalism, namely, a comparison of my experiences at Allied and Haraszti's experiences at Red Star in which each factory stood for the respective type of political economy. The project assumed that each society was internally homogeneous and unchanging. The next step was to explore variations of and within capitalism and state socialism to see if there was any basis to the claims I had made. Perhaps these were simply two anomalous factories?

The most difficult task was to determine whether the bureaucratic despotism found at Red Star was typical of socialist

Hungary and then why Solidarity sprung to life in Poland rather than Hungary (not to mention the Soviet Union). A second, easier task was to examine whether the hegemonic regime was representative of the United States and whether U.S. production politics was distinctive among advanced capitalist countries. A third task was to pose the question of despotism—how did the bureaucratic despotism of Red Star compare with the market despotism of early capitalism? This is where I began.

The conceptualization of hegemonic regimes under advanced capitalism and of bureaucratic despotism under state socialism both implied a contrast with market despotism of early capitalism.³ The hegemonic regime was built on a double supposition: first, that the reproduction of labor power (wages, social security, etc.) was independent of the expenditure of labor and, second, that the nation-state set limits on the way management could wield its power by regulating a relatively autonomous “internal state.” Comparisons among machine shops, or similar work processes, in Japan, Sweden, England, and the United States substantiated the idea of a hegemonic regime’s association with advanced capitalism, although the regulation of industrial relations and the extent of the welfare state gave rise to different types of hegemonic regimes. But what they shared as hegemonic regimes separated them from the despotic regime of early capitalism. Here my point of departure was Marx’s characterization of manufacturing as a form of market despotism in nineteenth-century England, wherein the livelihood of the worker was directly dependent upon the expenditure of labor in the factory and subject to the arbitrary whim of the overseer. If the foundation of despotism in nineteenth-century England was the economic whip of the market, then the source

of despotism in socialist Hungary was the bureaucratic power of the party-state.

Marx provided the model of market despotism, but the reality of nineteenth-century industry was rather different, operating as it did through family patriarchy as a mode of recruitment and regulation or through the company town, which assured the binding of community to workplace and was ameliorated by the skill of the craftworker, who could not be replaced at will. Examining various secondary accounts of factory work, I could compare patriarchal and paternalistic regimes in the English cotton industry with the paternalism of the New England mills and the artisanal regimes of the Russian textile industry. What distinguished the prerevolutionary Russian case of despotism from its English and U.S. counterparts was the greater regulatory presence of the state at the site of production, which created a clear object of struggle. Just as workers could identify the state as exploiter and oppressor at Red Star, so the same was true in the prerevolutionary factories of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Both repressive orders were therefore vulnerable to insurrectionary struggles from workers. Through these successive historical comparisons I was able to determine the specific characteristics of bureaucratic despotism that distinguished it from market despotism.

Bureaucratic despotism might be vulnerable to the shared dissent of the workers it dominates, but why did the actual mobilization take place in Poland rather than Hungary? After all, Hungary, not Poland, had been the scene of the most dramatic worker uprising in 1956. Perhaps Red Star—or Haraszti’s portrait of Red Star—was not a typical Hungarian

factory. But how to find out? Just as I knew that in the United States hegemonic regimes of the monopoly sector coexisted with more despotic regimes of the competitive sector, I asked what the corresponding variation within a state socialist economy was. The most obvious counterpart to the monopoly and competitive sectors of advanced capitalism was the position of different enterprises with regard to central planning—the existence of key enterprises that received closer attention and more resources than the more marginal ones. Heavy industry had traditionally been given priority, whereas the consumer goods sector was underprivileged. Yet there was no evidence to suggest whether or how this affected work organization and its regulation. The few Hungarian studies that were available, by Héthy and Mako, documented a center and a periphery *within* the enterprise, with workers in the core having a more privileged existence on the shop floor than peripheral workers, who were subject to much greater hardship and labor intensity. This would begin to explain why Haraszti, a new and peripheral worker, was under such intense pressure to produce.

Further digging around revealed that Red Star Tractor Factory was also under the gun of economic reform when Haraszti was working there. This monster of a factory was subject to harder budget constraints as attempts were made to introduce economic criteria for efficiency. The pressure from the state to tighten up the factory's finances translated into pressure to work harder on the shop floor. Here was another reason why Haraszti might be working harder than workers in other socialist factories as well as workers in the United States. The enigma was beginning to unfold.

Positionality: American Worker in a Socialist Factory⁴

A Worker in a Worker's State was intended to be a general representation of all work under state socialism. At no point does Haraszti acknowledge that his experience might be specific to a particular factory (in crisis), to a particular time period (the beginning of reforms), to a particular country (Hungary), or even to his particular position within the factory. I had been trying to reconstruct the historical and locational specificity of his experience from theoretical explorations and secondary data. Because the evidence was thin, I decided to examine the question by taking a job in a Hungarian factory myself. Of course, it would be a decade later but nonetheless worth the effort.

I was fascinated by the development of the Solidarity movement, which seemed to support the conclusions of my first essay on *A Worker in a Worker's State*, and I planned to go to Poland. By the time I managed to secure a leave of absence and was learning Polish, however, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski had staged his coup and Solidarity went underground. Instead I readily accepted the invitation of Iván Szelényi to accompany him to Hungary in the summer of 1982—his first trip back since being exiled to Australia. Coincidentally, his expulsion was in part due to his role in publishing Haraszti's book. During our two-week trip I learned of Hungary's burgeoning sociology of labor and labor markets. I returned the following summer for six months, learning Hungarian and working first on a state farm that produced champagne and then in a small textile shop located on an agricultural cooperative. During this period I began my collaboration with János Lukács, then a young industrial sociologist at the Institute of Sociology in the Academy of Sciences.

The following summer (1984) I landed a job as a machine operator in the manufacturing plant that we called Bánki, which is analogous to Allied and Red Star. It wasn't easy to secure the position because the fate of the working class was perhaps the most heavily guarded secret of state socialism. While not overly enthusiastic, the director of the enterprise was willing to go along with the idea of my working on the shop floor, so long as all the "authorities" would endorse the project. The Academy of Sciences supported my request, and Lukács used a contact in the Central Committee to secure the support of the party. It was a tortuous process, but in the end permission was granted. I could enter the hidden abode of socialist production. I recall the look of glee on the shop superintendent's face when he was told to give me a job. He led me to an old radial drill that no one used. I soon learned why: it was not just old but dangerous. I'd never run a radial drill in my life, but for two months that's what I tried to do. In fact, it assumed a superhuman form, running me rather than being run by me.

Much of what I had inferred from Haraszti and the few industrial sociologists who had studied state socialist work was true. The party, the trade union, and management were in cahoots, although they were not necessarily the oppressive presence described by Haraszti. When I tried to file a grievance with the union for nonpayment of overtime, everyone laughed at me. The union—they are *nulla nulla* (nothing). And, yes, the piece-rate system worked much as Haraszti described it, with no security wage. The rates weren't easy, at least for me, but they were nowhere near as tight as at Red Star, which reinforced my supposition that Red Star was indeed a victim of the economic reforms of the immediate post-1968 period.

The most distinctive difference was our conception of social relations on the shop floor. Haraszti painted a picture of atomized individuals, and here I think he was projecting his own (unreflected) placement within the factory. As a dissident, a Jew, and an intellectual, he was shunned by his coworkers. He was thrown into competition with them, he was ruled by them, and he was most certainly not one of them. To be sure, I was not one of them either—but my strangeness had an appeal. They laughed at my inept Hungarian, at my incompetence as a machine operator, and I was embraced as an exotic foreigner. Within hours of hitting the shop floor I was ringed by workers asking me about the United States. From my vantage point I could see and experience the spontaneous cooperation that made production possible in the socialist factory.

Here I drew on the work of the great Hungarian economist János Kornai (1971, 1980) and his theory of the socialist economy as a shortage economy. In an economy of centralized (re)distribution, enterprise managers continually bargain with the state for resources, as a result of which they are always in short supply. But Kornai was not one to fall into false comparisons. He understood that market economies have their own disequilibria, not in the direction of shortage but in the direction of surplus. Each economy had its own (ir)rationality—the one constrained from the side of supply, the other from the side of demand. That explained a lot. For, to be effective, socialist work organization had to improvise in the face of the fluctuating quantity and quality of inputs on the one side and the pressure from plan targets on the other. I saw such flexible cooperation all around me at Bánki, and, curiously, its work organization was far more efficient than at Allied, where incomplete engines lined the aisles,

where management was always demanding that “hot jobs”—a sort of rush work—take precedence over everything else. In other words, it was not that capitalism was rational and socialism irrational but that each system had its own (ir)rationality.

I concluded that Bánki looked more like the stereotype of a capitalist workplace, while Allied exhibited features of the stereotypical socialist workplace. The reason lay in the character of a multinational capitalist corporation, which is itself a planned economy generating its own internal shortages. There was a reverse embeddedness—a corporate enterprise within a market economy in the United States and a marketized enterprise within a corporate economy in Hungary. Just as U.S. enterprises compensated for market exigencies with bureaucratized internal labor markets, so Hungarian enterprises experimented with market-driven inside-contracting systems to address the exigencies of central planning.

From my vantage point in production I was able to see more clearly the differences and similarities between advanced capitalist and state socialist production. Haraszti's account made no attempt at comparing socialist and capitalist work but rather was aimed at the yawning gap between ideology and reality, between the workers' paradise projected by the state and the reality experienced on the shop floor. Still, even that experience on the shop floor was colored, in ways he did not reveal, by his own biography, his embodiment so much at odds with his fellow workers—a difference that set him apart from the working-class community. Concerned with debunking state ideology, he had no interest in the peculiarity of his own experience, whether the product of who he was (manifestly a novice and outsider) or where he was (in a factory subject to fiscal pressures). My own

difference, on the other hand, brought me into the community so that I could, with the help of my experiences at Allied, explore the specificity of state socialist production.

Extending Theory: Western Marxist Meets Eastern Dissident⁵

The last stage of my Hungarian odyssey took me into the heart of the working class—the Lenin Steel Works situated in the industrial city of Miskolc. Between 1985 and 1988 I worked there as a furnaceman on three occasions that totaled about a year in all. The importance of shop-floor autonomy in the face of a shortage economy was even more apparent here in the production of high-quality steel. I was again working with Lukács, who spent time interviewing management, and we observed the clash of two principles—management's bureaucratic regulation and workers' spontaneous collaboration. Often we observed how senior management's interference disrupted the capacity of the shop floor to adapt to the fluctuating quality of materials and unreliable machinery. When Lukács and I reported our findings to management, a party meeting was called in which our research was denounced and we were told to do it over.

Because I was firmly integrated into the October Revolution Socialist Brigade, I was able to focus on the class consciousness of socialist workers. Again, this was not a question of much concern to Haraszti, yet his own perspective as a dissident was not that different from those of my coworkers. Compelled to participate in rituals that proclaimed socialism to be just, efficient, and egalitarian, what I called “painting socialism,” my coworkers were only too keenly aware of the injustices, inefficiencies, and inequalities that pervaded their life. This led them,

so I argued, to embrace the idea of socialism but as an immanent critique of the party-state that governed their lives. Finally, I was approaching the question of the Polish Solidarity movement—the question that had brought me to Hungary.

I worked with Konrád and Szelényi's (1979) theory, which regarded state socialism as a system of central appropriation and redistribution of goods and services, a system in which intellectuals play a key role in defining societal needs to be realized in the plan. State socialism, which justifies open and transparent domination and exploitation, has a legitimation problem. A system that requires legitimation is always vulnerable to being held accountable to its ideology. State socialism is vulnerable to immanent critique, demanding that the party-state live up to its promises. Whereas this led Haraszti to cynical dismissal of the whole enterprise, it led workers to demand the proclaimed fruits of socialism. Through this lens Solidarity was not an attempt to overthrow the state but to force the state to take its own ideology seriously. It did this by keeping its distance from the state, opposing it with a burgeoning, self-regulating civil society.

But the puzzle remained: Why Poland and not Hungary? Here the question was not so much one of a class-in-itself becoming a class-for-itself, that is, the capitalist question of consciousness raising, but rather a different question: How could class consciousness become a material force? In Hungary the development of a market economy to compensate for the dysfunctions of planning—the cooperatives both inside and outside production—led to a competitive individualism. In Poland, on the other hand, the lesser development of the second economy on the one side, and the umbrella of the Catholic Church on the other, created the propensity and the resources for collective mobilization.

As I was busy working out the conditions for the working-class challenge to state socialism and the possibilities for a transition to democratic socialism, history took its revenge. Hungary's socialism did not capitulate from below but collapsed from above, and the transition was not toward some democratic socialism but toward market capitalism. This was not without some resistance. My own shop steward in the October Revolution Socialist Brigade took part in an effort to resurrect the council system that had sprung up in 1956, by turning the struggle over privatization into a struggle for worker control of industry. My collaborator, János Lukács, inspired by what he saw of ESOPs (employee stock ownership plans) in the United States, sought to introduce parliamentary legislation that would favor workers taking over their factories. But in the end this was all to no avail, as managers grabbed the profitable parts of socialist enterprises, leaving the state to subsidize the rest.

I and the workers around me were completely unprepared for the transition to capitalism precisely because we were so focused on production. The transition game was being played at the political level, slowly but surely, bringing in its train privatization and devastating consequences for the Lenin Steel Works as well as many other industries. Whereas the Lenin Steel Works would slowly disintegrate over ten years to become a black dwarf, Bányi would be completely rebuilt by its German partners. When I returned for a visit in 1999, I discovered the old, gray, noisy, oily, and dirty socialist factory had been turned into a bright and polished high-tech plant run by neatly clad technicians who were nursing numerically controlled machines with a barely audible hum.

How could I have been so blind? As a Marxist I came to Hungary in search of the potentialities of socialism, but now

I faced the unexpected transition to capitalism. To help me uncover the potentialities of socialism, I had compared state socialism with capitalism, never thinking that one would morph into the other. To be sure, I had reconstructed Marxism to accommodate the past, a working-class revolt under state socialism. I had recognized that whereas capitalism might organize the consent of workers, state socialism was far more fragile and was as likely as not to generate dissent. In the end, however, the party leadership's loss of faith in its own ideology resulted in the crumbling of the socialist edifice and the imposition of capitalism.

While theory was indispensable for the comparative analysis, it also limited what I could see. Haraszti suffered a similar fate. He too revised his theory of state socialism in the 1980s. He now saw state socialism not as a repressive order but as a more smoothly running panopticon, absorbing rather than punishing dissent (Haraszti 1987). Dissidents were no longer shot, jailed, exiled, or even sent into factories. They were watched by giving them space to make their criticisms, a far more powerful and effective mechanism of control. Like me, he did not anticipate the collapse of this order, and like me he was heavily invested in state socialism—his identity as a dissident relied on its continued existence. In the aftermath he became no less estranged than I was. Like other dissident intellectuals, he would enter politics but, as in so many cases, this was not for long. Dissidence was in his blood, just as Marxism was in mine.

THE TRAUMA OF THE CAPITALIST TRANSITION IN RUSSIA

While all eyes were on the disintegration of state socialism in Eastern Europe, my attention turned to the Soviet Union. Now, in the full flow of perestroika and glasnost, a country hitherto

off-limits was opening itself to the sociological eye. I'd been to the Soviet Union on five occasions during the 1980s—two conferences on U.S. and Soviet labor history and three extraordinary trips with Erik Wright to launch a Soviet version of his survey of class structure. It was all too clear to me that the Soviet Union was politically inhospitable to ethnographic studies, but additionally this was not something Soviet sociologists would ever take seriously. It simply wasn't science. I was very skeptical, therefore, when I received an invitation, while on sabbatical in Hungary in 1990, to spend ten days on the Volga River lecturing to a boat full of industrial sociologists. Still, I accepted, as I had never even seen the Volga and was always looking for new adventures, not to mention the distraction it afforded from the ongoing Hungarian debacle of the transition to capitalism. As it turned out, it was quite an adventure. The politically courageous organizer, Nina Andreenkova, let me (and three other social scientists from the United States) loose among about 130 sociologists and personnel officers from a diverse array of organizations, including military plants, from all over the Soviet Union.

On that boat, fittingly called the *Gogol*, I met Kathryn Hendley, then a political science graduate student at Berkeley, and Pavel Krotov, a sociologist from Syktyvkar, capital of the Komi Republic in the far north of European Russia. With Kathie I would collaborate on a study of a Soviet rubber factory, known as Kauchuk, during the following winter (1991) and with Pavel I would develop a ten-year partnership, studying the capitalist transition in Komi.

The theoretical framework that I had developed in Hungary came up against all sorts of challenges at Kauchuk, where we stumbled upon civil war. The study of these internal struggles in

a Moscow factory was followed, later that spring, by a study of the timber industry in Komi, beginning with my own participant observation in a furniture factory. Here, Krotov and I looked more carefully at the character of the transformation of the economy as a whole, a move to what we called merchant capitalism.

In the first post-Soviet decade that followed, I teamed up with other sociologists in Komi, most notably Tatyana Lytkina, to examine the process of economic and social involution as it affected family life. This called for a major overhaul of my theoretical framework, a shift from Marx to Polanyi. I would leave Komi with a whimper rather than a bang as my attention was turned back to the fate of American sociology.

*Social Process: Between Perestroika and Privatization*⁶

My introduction to working-class life in Hungarian socialism came by way of the lyrical account of Miklós Haraszti; my introduction to the Soviet landscape was more dramatic and visceral. Kathie Hendley and I insinuated ourselves into an old "political" enterprise—Kauchuk, a rubber factory that had begun production in 1915. We arrived in January 1991, when Russia had already plunged into political turmoil. The party had formally relinquished its monopoly of political power, and the Baltic Republics, inspired by the path taken in Eastern Europe, were asserting their autonomy. The struggle between Yeltsin and Gorbachev, between the Russian Federation and the Soviet Union, was intensifying. On the one side were the forces for privatization and a market economy while on the other side were apparatchiki still invested in the continuity of the planned economy. The crisis

that engulfed the Soviet Union became a fault line running through Kauchuk itself.

Mode of entry always says much about the place being entered. Whether because of the changing times or because of Soviet specificities, access to Kauchuk was very different from access to the Hungarian enterprises. In the latter case Lukács had to enlist the support of a range of powerful authorities in state and party, national and local, as well as enterprise management. Here we gained entry through a deal that we struck with the trade union leadership. If we provided computers for their kindergarten, we could have carte blanche access to the enterprise and its personnel. So that's what we did, notwithstanding opposition from Soviet customs officials. And, with the assertiveness of a corporate lawyer, Kathie got us access to almost everything we desired. Much to my disbelief, we even got into the morning planning meetings, where all managers assembled to discuss the state of the enterprise, the bottlenecks, the breakdowns. The dysfunctionality of the Soviet enterprise was laid out before us—until we were banned from those meetings.

From this privileged vantage point Kauchuk looked vastly different from the Hungarian enterprises that I had studied. First, I had finally stumbled on the true economy of shortage. Kornai insisted that, reforms or no reforms, socialist enterprises suffered from shortages, but there are shortages and shortages. They were not so palpable at Hungarian enterprises, but Kauchuk was awash with shortages, not least because of the collapsing Soviet infrastructure and the factory's dependence on materials from all over the Soviet Union. The manager of supplies was regularly vilified in the planning meetings, and it remained a mystery not only how he survived in that position

but also how he actually secured basic supplies during the winter of 1991. We finally managed to interview him, but he was an astute and wily customer who gave away no secrets of his trade.

In some ways the external turmoil exaggerated the pathologies of the Soviet enterprise, and yet, paradoxically, at the same time it also exaggerated tendencies in the opposite direction, reminiscent of the entrepreneurial moments of the Hungarian enterprise. Turbulence in the wider economy deepened the problem of shortage but, equally, created the opportunity for a complex network of cooperatives that thrived within the protective shell of the formal enterprise. The Hungarian second economy—the inside contracting cooperatives—was sedate, transparent, and restrained compared with the wild entrepreneurship we observed at Kauchuk. All the workshops contained their own cooperatives or even “small enterprises” (as they were then called), where the real money was made. Funneling labor, machinery, materials, and social contacts into their ventures, chosen managers and selected workers were able to make a killing at the expense of the official enterprise. I’d seen all this at the Lenin Steel Works but only after 1989. At Kauchuk we saw this spontaneous privatization from below within the fast-eroding Soviet economy, although we didn’t know that its collapse was just around the corner.

The internal economic transformation of Kauchuk was reflected in schisms cutting through its political regime. Managers could not hide from us the open warfare between the director and his henchmen on the one side and the younger technicians and engineers on the other. The old guard, connected to the ministries, resolutely defended the Soviet planning order, while the young Turks defended the encroaching market system

and, in what was a political reflex of the same project, the autonomy of the Russian Federation from the Soviet Union. We witnessed public meetings in which the young Turks attacked the director’s private accumulation of wealth (through the cooperatives), while the director and his supporters condemned the young Turks for sabotaging the enterprise to pursue their own careers. The party apparatus within the enterprise was supposed to be the keeper of the peace, but it had already effectively dissolved. Nothing could restrain an all-out struggle for control of the enterprise. I had seen workers use guerrilla tactics on Hungarian shop floors, but this was the first time I had seen two alternative political-economic systems vying for power within a single enterprise.

This was my introduction to the Soviet economy. We were there for two months before I moved out of Moscow and trekked north to the Komi Republic, where I began a quite unexpected ten years of research into the processes and repercussions of economic decline.

Exploring Context:

From Merchant Capitalism to Economic Involution⁷

I got a job at Polar Furniture in 1991 through a rather circuitous route. Pavel Krotov, whom I met on the *Gogol*, was the first Soviet sociologist I came across who exhibited the ethnographic instinct. He came from a poor background, knew the life of the down-trodden, and was fearless in exploring it. One of his friends was a Korean entrepreneur who had recently left the local university, like so many in late perestroika, to set up a small business. He, in turn, was a good friend of the young leader of

the republic's Labor Federation—part of a new generation of politicians that would come to power after the fall of the Soviet Union. Through the offices of the official trade union Pavel and I spent a month visiting all the main enterprises in the city. We hit it off with the personnel manager of Polar Furniture as he showed off his new model factory, which made wall units, the staple furniture of every Soviet apartment. So we inquired whether I could work there. The old man who was director—a known public figure—laughed and said why not. So I began working there, once again drilling holes, while Krotov talked with management for two critical months—May and June 1991—and then we spent another month trying to construct the linkages among the different enterprises of the Komi timber industry.

Kauchuk, which was at the heart of the Soviet system and dependent on supplies from all over the country, was far more vulnerable to the turmoil in the economy than the furniture company was. Polar Furniture was situated in the periphery and able to capitalize, at least for a short time, on the disintegration of the planning system. Management formed a unified bloc, cleverly taking advantage of the new uncertainty. Space for maneuvering opened up as the power of the central planning agencies evaporated. Polar had many advantages: it was well placed in the local timber consortium that organized the local industry, it depended on local supplies of timber and other materials, and it had a monopoly in the production of a needed consumer item—wall units. While shop-floor life was still subject to shortages, and I experienced many moments of production standstill as well as end-of-month rush work, it did not have the chaos of Kauchuk. Indeed, workers and management had

struck a bargain. The various shops took responsibility for meeting the production plan, while management was responsible for making sure that supplies arrived, for which end they had a precious commodity to barter, namely, wall units. Management could also use wall units to barter for timber supplies, lacquer, or whatever other materials were needed but also for places in summer camps for children of employees or for sugar, which was then being rationed.

As the political superstructure of state socialism peeled away, and as the centralized distribution system disintegrated, enterprises were left to fend for themselves and those who could exploited their monopoly position in the emergent market. Time horizons shrunk, and no one was thinking about capital investment. Instead they were turning to a primitive prebourgeois capitalism based on booty, adventure, speculation, or piracy. Instead of capital accumulation, we found asset stripping. As Max Weber insisted, such a capitalism, what we called merchant capitalism—seeking profit in exchange rather than production—is a revolution away from modern bourgeois capitalism. Yes, the market was stepping in to replace the planning mechanism but with disastrous consequences.

The collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 only consolidated the perverse effects of the market. At the beginning of 1992 prices were liberated and astronomical inflation was the immediate result, fueling barter and the invention of new currencies. Voucher privatization, represented as a democratic way of sharing the public wealth, proved to be a peaceful and effective system of looting by the powerful. In the summer of 1992 we went up to the coal mines of Vorkuta, the site of militant strikes in 1989 and 1991, which, together with miners from

Siberia and Ukraine, played an important role in bringing down the Soviet Union. In Vorkuta a syndicalist fever had gripped the workers. They thought that the demolition of the party-state and their taking over the mines would install a new order of plentitude. Instead they would become the victims of mine closures as coal became more expensive with the spiraling price of transportation and as the demand for coal fell with the collapse of the metallurgical industry. From 1991 to 1998 the Russian economy seemed to be in free fall. The only dynamic sectors involved natural resources (gas and oil) and the realm of exchange where the mafia, banks, or newfangled intermediaries were gouging the rest of the economy. There was neither revolution nor evolution but economic *involution*, a gradual hollowing out of production by exchange. It was a process of primitive disaccumulation.

To underline how catastrophic the transition to the market was, I extended my study even further beyond the factory, comparing the Russian and Chinese transitions. To be sure, my knowledge of China was limited but the argument seemed compelling to me. The Russian transition to capitalism was a replica of its earlier transition to socialism—dominated by revolutionary intent. Western economists were also preaching the quickest transition possible—big bang and shock therapy—to forestall any political backlash against the market. The Bolshevik transition to capitalism argued for the most rapid destruction of all that was socialist, specifically, all the levers of central control, on the assumption that the market would rise spontaneously. But there is no market transition to a market economy without the creation of supporting institutions (financial, legal, material infrastructure). This was the lesson of China, where a market

economy was incubated under the supervision of the party-state. If in Russia there was political transition without economic transformation, in China there was economic transformation without political transition.

*Theory: From Marx to Polanyi*⁸

To study a small furniture factory in northern Russia and draw conclusions about the transition to capitalism will appear preposterous to those who think social science proceeds through induction from fact to theory. If, however, we recognize that facts are always theory laden, and we therefore must begin with theory, then science progresses through the reconstruction of theory. We have to be self-conscious about the theory we carry into our studies. I began with a theory—developed in my research in Hungary and before that in the United States and Zambia through (real and imagined) dialogue with others such as Szelényi and Kornai—of how the Soviet economic system worked. Kauchuk and then Polar Furniture became the vehicles for extending this theory to the transition to a market economy. In other words, the theory constitutes the case and the case in turn helps to reconstruct theory.

However, the theory I worked with was manifestly Marxist, focusing on the political economy of state socialism. From Szelényi I had elaborated the class character of state socialism, based on “teleological redistributors” who appropriated and then redistributed surplus in a transparent fashion. These redistributors—planners, if you will—needed a justifying ideology, which in turn set in motion immanent critique. Capitalism was very different. It hid its exploitative practices and secured the

coordination of interests between conflicting parties. Its domination became a hegemony based on the consent of workers and intellectuals. State socialism, on the other hand, had to legitimate its central appropriation, its barefaced exploitation. It therefore always faced a potential legitimization crisis that threatened to bring down the system as a whole. State socialism was always a fragile order, which was why it had such frequent recourse to force. The success of the Hungarian system lay in the effort to build hegemony alongside and in support of legitimization.

From Kornai I derived the distinctive character of work and its regulation. A shortage economy required a spontaneous and flexible specialization on the shop floor that gave rise to solidarities that could fuel a working-class movement against state socialism. I was, of course, wrong. State socialism dissolved from above rather than below. The legitimators themselves could no longer believe in their own legitimization; they lost confidence in the capacity of the party-state to deliver on its socialist promises. Like rats they fled their sinking ship for an imaginary one, dragging with them a population also victim of its own hallucinations.

This revised Marxist theory could make sense of the collapse of the old order—the veritable forces of production had collided with the relations of production, a collision most forcibly felt by the political directorate. But Marxist theory had greater difficulty making sense of the genesis of the new capitalist order, especially as industrial production soon disappeared altogether. With the unleashing of market forces, what we were observing in Syktyvkar was the retreat to an economy of barter, reciprocity, and household production. The strategy of research had to change dramatically. Instead of working on the shop floor with Krotov interviewing managers, I turned to the workers who

were losing their jobs, trying to comprehend how they were surviving. I teamed up with a brilliant interviewer, Tatyana Lytkina, and together we visited households of those who had worked at Polar Furniture and at a local garment factory. We learned the importance of social networks of exchange, political resources that garnered benefits from the state, especially pensions, and the economic significance of subsistence production. Women became the center of household production and men hangers-on. Men were more likely to have lost their wage-labor jobs and were singularly ill prepared to do anything else, whereas women held on to their jobs in the service and retail sectors and were much better able to adapt to the exigencies of a barter economy—they inherited those skills from state socialism, and they shouldered the responsibility for children. The story is a familiar one in different parts of the world undergoing structural adjustment.

The market transition required a new body of theory, and for this I turned to the work of Karl Polanyi, who became a key figure in transition studies. *The Great Transformation* (1944) engaged the dangers of market fundamentalism—the view that left to themselves markets could solve all economic problems. Polanyi argued that when certain entities—land, labor, and money in particular—are fully commodified, they can no longer perform their function. Exchange values destroy use value so that fully commodified land can no longer support agriculture, so that fully commodified workers can no longer contribute their labor, so that fully commodified money can no longer serve as a medium of exchange. Markets cannot survive if they are not embedded in social relations that regulate and sustain limited commodification.

If that's the general principle, the power of *The Great Transformation* lies in its historical treatment of market society. First, Polanyi shows the crucial role of the state in creating and then sustaining market capitalism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. In short, there is no market road to a market economy. Second, if market forces are unregulated, they generate a reaction precisely because they threaten the very existence of society—and the reaction takes different forms in different societies. So Polanyi claims that the countermovement in the nineteenth century was largely due to the spontaneous revolt of labor—the development of trade unions, cooperatives, friendly societies, and the factory movement to limit the length of the working day. In the twentieth century the countermovement revolved around the nation-state, reacting to global markets: social democracy in Scandinavia, the New Deal in the United States, but also fascism in Italy, Spain, and Germany; and Stalinist collectivization and planning in the Soviet Union. For Polanyi reactions to the market can easily erode the freedoms of liberal democracy and therein lies its danger. *The Great Transformation* spelled out the dangers of the liberal creed, what we now call neoliberalism. What, then, is the character of this third great transformation?

What better foundation than *The Great Transformation* for exploring the consequences of the market transition in Russia? Working with Polanyi's theory, I asked what sort of countermovement to market fundamentalism did Russia exhibit? All my research pointed to the absence of a countermovement from below—the working class had been decimated and its morale deflated. The Soviet working class was in full flight from the market, defending itself against the on-rushing market tide.

There was no evidence that, driven to extremes, it would spontaneously turn against the tide as Polanyi imputed to the English working class. Rather, reaction was more likely to come from above by way of a repressive state. Putin fit the role perfectly, personifying the authoritarian response to market fundamentalism.

Positionality: The Ethnographer Out of Place

When studying capitalism in the United States, Africa, Hungary, or even Russia in 1991, the site of production was still at the center of the world. It disclosed the physiognomy of the social formation in which it was embedded. Just as the market transition called forth a shift in theoretical perspective from Marx to Polanyi, from production to exchange, from exploitation to commodification, so it also called forth a fundamental ethnographic repositioning in all three dimensions: location, embodiment, and biography.

When plants were closing down and production was in free fall, taking someone's job was not only immoral but also not the place from which to study the new order. The energy of the new order came from the sphere of exchange that was replacing planned distribution. In the winter of 1993 Krotov and I devoted ourselves to the investigation of Komi banks in Syktyvkar. In the Soviet era banks were largely accounting centers, an epiphenomenon of the planning system, but now they became a fulcrum of transition. But how to study a bank as an ethnographer? We tried for five months and, while this afforded us all sorts of insights into the dilemmas of the new companies serviced by the bank, understanding the bank itself was far more challenging.

Once one gains entry into a factory, it is no longer hidden; its functioning is there for all to observe. Production is tangible. Not so with a bank. This is not a productive entity but a transactional entity, and transactions have no firm place in space or time. We could talk to everyone in the bank, except the person who was making all the decisions, and miss all that was crucial. Precisely because its transactions are invisible, it can be the vehicle for the wholesale movement of resources from the realm of production to the realm of exchange and from there into all sorts of surprising outlets. On reflection I think we were rather fortunate not to discover much, as we might never have lived to tell the tale. At that time banking was a hazardous occupation as its leading cadres were the target (or source) of much criminal activity. Bankers were routinely being imprisoned or shot—an indication that something important was at stake.

If location in the field was the problem we faced in the bank, it was the combination of location and embodiment that obstructed the study of survival strategies of families of the now-unemployed or semiemployed workers. Short of living with them, it was almost impossible to grasp how they survived, and they certainly, with the best will in the world, could not articulate their tacit, nondiscursive knowledge. Even had I lived in families, I think it would have been difficult to comprehend what they were up to. The complexity of their lives would have been inaccessible. I simply did not have the categories, the concepts, or the theory with which to interpret what I heard and saw. All this was made amply clear to me when I worked with Tatyana Lytkina. I watched with awe and amazement how she unraveled, layer by layer, the household strategies that our informants recounted. She knew when and how to probe, she

knew what was justification and what was cause, what was surface and what was deep. It might take her several long interviews, but she always managed to ferret out from our informants things they did not comprehend themselves that were so much a part of their unexamined life.

After every interview, during which I generally remained silent, she would interrogate me to see what I had understood. Hard as I might try, I invariably failed the test. It was not simply my language skills but the unfamiliarity of the practices embedded in that language. Our informants knew that Tanya understood their lives—she was from their class, she grew up in a rural community and migrated to town like so many. She went through the same struggles as they, trying to keep her own family together. She shared with them the language of life, a very specific life that was inaccessible to me. I was fascinated by the confidence and assertiveness with which she interrogated her interviewees and how trusting were their responses.

Gender, of course, was central to the picture. From her own life she understood what it meant to be the main breadwinner and manager of the household. She understood what so many men could not. Indeed, when we tried to interview men about strategies of survival, we quickly landed in a cul-de-sac. Even under Tanya's prompting—and she was an expert interviewer with many arrows to her bow—men simply did not know what was going on in their own household; they abstained from the very process, had become parasites and burdens. In their depression they had also become inarticulate.

It was not just my gender but my nationality and, indeed, my profession that posed serious problems in the field. Not just with regard to families but also with regard to our studies of

enterprises—whether it be the timber, coal, or construction industries—our interviews became more difficult over time. In the beginning managers were full of hope for the future, happy to embrace a sociologist from the United States, proud of the possibilities of their enterprises in the newly found freedom of the market. But as they struggled to survive, as the economy plunged into depression, so the mood of the managers also changed. Rather than greet me as a long-lost friend, they wondered what I was doing, returning year after year. I often wondered myself. To be sure, my coworkers from Polar, at least those who had managed to find jobs elsewhere after its closure, were happy to greet me in their homes. But working-class Syktyvkar was a decaying society in which social research became daily more difficult.

It is interesting indeed to think about my reception in different workplaces, my biography of engagement. At Allied, where the workforce was fragmented by age and by race, and workers came from all over the South Side of Chicago, workers had little tolerance for my incompetence. My experiences there were perhaps more similar to Haraszti's at Red Star. When I came to Hungary, the situation was reversed and my incompetence was a source of amusement, eliciting sympathy and even affection from my coworkers. There I would go out drinking with my brigade and visit its members in their homes—the only problem was when to write my field notes. Especially at the Lenin Steel Works, the more I drank, the more I had to write, the less time I had at my disposal, and the more difficult it was to concentrate.

Russia, however, was more like Chicago. Here my exotic qualities redounded against me. Syktyvkar had been a "closed" city, more or less cut off from the outside world, so my coworkers had

never seen an American before, let alone a professor laboring on their machines. I felt my every move was being watched, and I was excluded from shop-floor rituals. This was also the time of Gorbachev's campaign against alcohol consumption so it was difficult to break the ice with alcohol. Instead a few workers took pity on me and invited me to play dominoes during breaks and downtime. As I discovered years later, that was not the only problem. The forewoman in my shop had exploited my presence, continually warning workers that they had better come to work on time because there was an American watching!

Finally, there was the age factor. When I began my ethnographic odyssey in Chicago, I was twenty-seven, toward the lower end of the age spectrum. There were people my age, and I could stand to work for eight, ten, and even twelve hours a day. Ten years later it was already more difficult—but added to that, transactions were conducted in shop-floor Hungarian, and one never gets used to rotating on shifts. By the time I got onto the Russian shop floor I was forty-four—not that old for a real worker but arduous for an itinerant one like me. Moreover, learning yet another language at that age, for someone who is not good at languages in the first place, was an uphill struggle. As it turned out, Russian industry more or less shut down so I didn't have to ever work again. For me it was a blessing, for others a catastrophe.

So we see how the very processes of involution that had expelled my coworkers from the factories, expelled me from my place in the field. Like them, I had become a parasite on female labor, female skills. Marked by gender, nationality, and redundant skills, I had become an ethnographer out of place, ready to ignominiously exit the field.

CONCLUSION: COMPARISONS, CONNECTIONS, AND COLLABORATIONS

Of late there has been much talk of “counterhegemonic globalization,” the idea of an incipient movement of globalization from below that connects labor movements, feminist movements, racial diasporas, or nongovernmental organizations across national boundaries. It’s never clear what *counter* or *hegemonic* signifies with regard to these movements, in what way they contain the seeds of any alternative hegemony or how they challenge “globalization from above,” which is itself left largely unexamined. More likely, *counterhegemony* is wishful thinking or illusory phrase mongering. Counterhegemony is the romantic side of multisited ethnography, based on fictitious solidaristic connections or flows across the world and imagining the fiction to be an emancipatory political project.

This chapter has shown, at least for the case of labor, that existing patterns of domination leave little room for alternative hegemonies from below. If and when they have existed, as in the case of Polish Solidarity, they are based on national struggles of limited duration. If we want to approach “globalization from below,” let alone counterhegemony, we have to first think through the ways labor is trapped in more local containers—factories, communities, and nations. One might say that the relevant “fields of force” stretch vertically from the labor regime rather than horizontally across labor regimes. We must move from the empiricism of multisited ethnography to the theoretically driven multicase ethnography of “factory regimes.”

This chapter has described my attempts to study such factory regimes, first in state socialist Hungary and then in post-Soviet

Russia, in search of the conditions and possibilities of “Solidarity” and kindred movements against state socialism. The first stage of the research, 1982–89, began in a synchronic mode, comparing the bureaucratic despotic regimes of state socialism to the hegemonic regimes of advanced capitalism and to the market despotisms of early capitalism. In the second stage of the research, 1991–2002, carried forward on the wave of dissolving state socialism, I turned from a synchronic comparison to a diachronic analysis of the Russian transition to capitalism, a process of economic involution.

Methodologically, I undertook what one might call a stepwise sampling in which one comparison led to the next. I didn’t select a sample of cases and then investigate them together but instead pursued them serially in a succession of comparisons. Thus in the first comparison I contrasted my own experiences at Allied with Haraszti’s account of Red Star, locating each in its distinctive political economy. This raised the question of variations over time and space within state socialist Hungary—how typical was Haraszti’s experience? Here I uncovered the effects on production regimes of economic reforms, of position within the overall Hungarian economy, and of the dualism created within socialist factories.

These were the “realist” moments of the extended case method, but what about the ways Haraszti’s portrait of shop-floor life was affected by his relations with his coworkers? To establish an appropriate comparison I needed to partake in the state socialist labor process myself. With János Lukács as my collaborator and guide, I made my way into Bánki from where I conjectured that Haraszti’s account of atomism and oppression was in part the product of his own specific outsider status. By

contrast, my own outsider status brought me into close connection with the collectivist dynamics of the shop floor. From Bánki, Lukács and I moved to the Lenin Steel Works, where a much longer stint of working allowed me to develop the second moment of constructivism—theoretical reconstruction. As a Western Marxist I looked for working-class opposition to state socialism, focusing on its collective basis within the steel mill, in contrast to Haraszti, the dissident who saw the workplace through the lens of totalitarianism.

The four moments of the extended case method—two realist and two constructivist—are inseparable because we can know the world only through our relation to it. Yet we cannot focus on all four moments simultaneously, so we aim our focus on one while, so to speak, holding the others constant. Since I am interested in the real world and its transformation, that is where I always begin. In the case of Hungary I chose to locate the different work organizations at Allied and Red Star within their respective overall political economies. This was possible only by “holding constant” social process, positionality, and theoretical framework, which were subsequently problematized.

In the case of Russia, Kathie Hendley and I did not begin with a structural (micro-macro) analysis of the Soviet political economy in flux but with the examination of internal processes, the civil war we encountered at the Moscow enterprise, Kauchuk. Yet this was possible only on the basis of preexisting theories of the Soviet enterprise, in particular the framework I had developed in socialist Hungary—theories that were also challenged by our experiences and observations. When I trekked north to Syktyvkar with Pavel Krotov, the wider transformation of the Soviet economy became more visible as we

studied the internal and external forces buffeting a small furniture factory. In the final analysis, however, the transition from socialism to capitalism demanded a new theoretical approach that focused on markets rather than production, and the logic of that theory led us out of the factory, first into the realm of exchange (banks) and then into the home, and with it came a new and unfamiliar positionality, as I orbited around my collaborator Tatyana Lytkina. The movement from case to case was rarely ruptural but represented a shift in focus from one moment of the extended case method to another.

We know the world only through our relation to it: sometimes that relation obscures the world, while sometimes it brings it into the light. In *Manufacturing Consent* I argued that the way workers were inserted into the world, that is, their relation to the world, mystified the working of that world—capitalism systematically obscured from its participants their exploitation. As an ethnographer I did not elaborate the “good sense” of my coworkers at Allied but rather broke with their “bad sense.” I made little attempt to connect my emergent reconstruction of Marxism to their folk understanding of the world. Very different was my experience in Hungary, where workers were inserted into production in a way that allowed them to see how that system worked. Their exploitation and subjugation were transparent to them. Here I could build my theory of state socialism on the basis of their “good sense,” and so I found myself collaborating in the joint production of knowledge. János Lukács became a central figure in this collaboration, and indeed I ended my Hungarian stint by studying him as he tried to introduce employee-owned enterprises under the rubric of privatization.

In the Soviet Union it was more difficult to gain access to the worlds of workers, even while I toiled on the shop floor at Polar Furniture. When the collapse came, I became dependent on my collaboration with Krotov and Lytkina. For much of the research we spent time with managers and entrepreneurs who were steering Russia through the market inferno, developing their own barter schemes, their own banks, and even their own currencies. Workers were indeed passive onlookers, suspicious of the machinations of the new grasping, speculative bourgeoisie. As the workers used to joke, all that the communists taught about socialism was wrong, all that they taught about capitalism was right. From the beginning I found myself critical of the taken-for-granted but false comparison of this Russian merchant capitalism with ideal-typical capitalism, as though the former would naturally evolve into the latter. Those who did recognize the abyss that separated the two fell into the trap of a false imputation—that the obstacles to the Russian transition were to be found in the legacies of communism. Harboring illusions of another radiant future, no one wanted to listen to the ravings of this alien Cassandra.

I began my socialist escapade in an optimistic vein, searching for the roots of Solidarity and the possibilities of a democratic socialism. I ended up in a pessimistic vein, recounting the eclipse of the very idea of socialism, dissolved in a primitive, marauding capitalism. Such are the dialectics of ethnography—you never end up where you begin, if only because this is research in real space and time. History takes its own course, which defies the very theory that makes it intelligible.

Conclusion

The Ethnography of Great Transformations

The twentieth century was strewn with the corpses of unrealized ideals—freedom, equality, and self-realization. In thwarting their realization, as Eric Hobsbawm writes, no century has been more brutal or more violent—it was indeed an age of extremes (Hobsbawm 1994). As the inheritors of the twentieth century, we can blame the specific ideals and seek out others whose realization might be less recalcitrant. Alternatively, we can blame idealism itself, banish ideals, and make the best of the existing order as the only possible world. But there is a third possibility. We can hold on to the old ideals, seeking new ways for their realization, ways informed by examining the social processes that led to their initial defeat. It is this third road that I have chosen.

The third road beckons us to refuse the nihilism that sees the twentieth century as a succession of events that piled wreckage upon wreckage and instead to step into the storm in order to take a closer look, turning a chain of catastrophes into distinctive