

Thinking with “Postsocialism” in an Ethnographic Study of Old Age in Poland

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Abstract: Twenty-five years after the end of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, how useful is the category of postsocialism? In this article, I suggest one possible answer to this question through a discussion of how this category emerged during ethnographic fieldwork on aging, personhood, and memory in Wrocław and Poznań, Poland. A binary Cold War framework that opposes socialism to postsocialism and East to West does not sufficiently explain the complexities of processes by which persons and social relations are created and transformed. However, “postsocialism” is defensible as an ethnographic, rather than analytic, category because these binary categories shape people’s expectations, hopes and imaginations. Ethnographic fieldwork in a range of institutional and non-institutional contexts found that older people were often understood as relics of the socialist past, that some older people look to the “West” for moral exemplars, and that national narratives of suffering provide moral frameworks for older Poles’ life histories. By interpreting these findings through a theoretical framework that centers on the processual formation of personhood and relatedness, this article thus helps anthropologists of Central and Eastern Europe create research imaginaries that escape dominant binary frameworks.

Keywords: postsocialism, theory, ethnography, Poland, aging

Introduction: postsocialism as a category of practice

Twenty-five years after the end of state socialism in central Europe, how useful is the category of postsocialism?¹ What does “postsocialism” help us to understand

1 Thank you to two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments that greatly improved this manuscript. Many thanks to my anthropology colleagues in Poland for productive conversations on this topic over many years. Special thanks go to the participants of the 2013 workshop “Beyond Socialism and Postsocialism: Contemporary Ethnographic Perspectives on Central/Eastern Europe” (co-organizer Hana Červinková, Monika Baer, Mariusz Filip, Martin Hribek, Marcin Kafar, and Patrycja Polczyk), which was hosted by the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław and funded with an Engaged Anthropology Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Ethnographic fieldwork on aging in Poland was supported by an IREX Individual Advanced Research Opportunity award, with support from the U.S. Department

about individual experiences, social relations, moral imaginations, and institutional structures in Central and Eastern Europe? Can we now speak of not only the socialist past, but also the postsocialist past?

In this article, I offer one possible answer to these questions by analyzing the utility of “postsocialism” as it relates to anthropological research on personhood in Central and Eastern Europe. The category of personhood offers a useful lens through which to view scholarly debates about the region and, in combination with ethnographic insights, suggests new perspectives for the practice and writing of anthropology of Central and Eastern Europe.

Specifically, I compare insights from secondary source literature with those drawn from twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork on aging, memory and personhood in Wrocław and Poznań, Poland. Despite my own experience as an American anthropologist trained during a time in which the socialist/postsocialist paradigm was dominant, I found that these categories were limited in helping me to make sense of the experiences of older people in Poland. In other words, this binary Cold War framework is insufficient to explain the complexities of processes by which persons and social relations are created and transformed. East/West differences do not hold up to historical and ethnographic scrutiny, nor do they explain as much as they promise.

It might therefore seem logical to do away with the anthropology of postsocialism and, more broadly, of “postsocialist.” However, I argue that “postsocialism” is defensible as an ethnographic, if not an analytic, category—that is, as a category of practice rather than a category of analysis (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). During my fieldwork, I found that older people were often understood as relics of the socialist past, almost as survivals of socialism. Moreover, some Poles of all ages look to the “West” for moral exemplars in many spheres of life. At the level of practice, then, East/West and socialist/postsocialist divisions continue to matter as categories that shape people’s expectations, hopes and imaginations. Because these terms still have utility, I suggest that we anthropologists pay attention to distinctions between categories of practice and categories of analysis in order to create research imaginaries that escape dominant binary frameworks.²

of State Title VIII; the Wenner-Gren Foundation (#7736); the National Science Foundation (DDIG #0819259); Elderhostel/Road Scholar, and several units at the University of Michigan. My greatest debts of gratitude, as always, are to the people who shared their lives with me during fieldwork.

2 Other topics in anthropology could also benefit from more clearly distinguishing categories of practice and analysis. For instance, recent discussions of care in American anthropology often confuse these fields, sometimes assuming that local Anglo-American understandings of “care” make it a useful cross-cultural category of analysis (personal communication of author with Elana Buch, Kathryn Goldfarb, Julia Kowalski, and Aaron Seaman).

Personhood in postsocialism: from labor to kinship

At the levels of both experience and analysis, studies of personhood in the anthropological literature on Central and Eastern Europe have been shaped by the political economy of the region. Post-1989 transformations in the socialist world led to dramatic changes in the structure and experience of political economic life in general, and of labor in particular. Because anthropology is a discipline that aims to describe, explain, and contextualize social change, there is now a large body of scholarship focusing on political economy and labor in Central and Eastern Europe. Anthropological studies of political economy and labor have thus contributed to explaining transformations in individual lives, social relations and institutional structures.

However, a recent debate (Dunn and Verdery 2011; Thelen 2011, 2012) demonstrates that anthropology's disciplinary focus on economic life can be seen as a product of institutional structures of knowledge, in which Cold War logic frames the categories of intellectual inquiry (see Buchowski 2012 for a related discussion). Scholars make two key points in this debate: first, the analytic focus on economics is justified because the category has historical and ethnographic significance (Dunn and Verdery 2011: 252; Thelen 2012: 88), and two, anthropological research in Central and Eastern Europe has sometimes reified the very East/West categories that it means to interrogate (Thelen 2012: 89). In other words, anthropologists should develop research projects that relate to significant contemporary social issues, while also maintaining a critical self-reflexivity about why and how *these* particular social issues become visible to the researcher.³ The role of the ethnographer and the ethnographer's training in the production of anthropological knowledge is fundamental to anthropological research across sociocultural and political-economic contexts (see Heider 1988 for a useful analysis of classic debates over conflicting ethnographic studies such as that between Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis). However, the role of the ethnographer's own intellectual framework becomes especially important for anthropology in and of Central and Eastern Europe given both the hegemonic and doxic role of the Cold War and the historical relationship (or lack thereof) between scholars working within and from outside eastern Europe.⁴

In addition to marginalizing the work of scholars from the region (Buchowski 2012) and reproducing Cold War discursive categories (Thelen 2011, 2012), the fo-

3 Some argue that the need for critical self-reflexive perspectives on the formation of research questions is especially important for non-native anthropologists (Buchowski 2012; Červinková 2012).

4 See also the debate between Michał Buchowski (2004, 2005) and Chris Hann (2005) in *Anthropology of East Europe Review* for a discussion of the relationship between anthropologists trained in central and eastern Europe who also do research there, and anthropologists trained in the West who study central and eastern Europe.

cus on political economy and labor may also have the effect of excluding from study other dimensions of social life and other phases of the life course. For example, in the first decade after 1989 the topics of kinship and care received less explicit scholarly attention (but see Borneman 1992 and Pine 1996 among others for notable exceptions), although more recent work suggests that this is changing (e.g., Caldwell 2004, 2007; Carlbäck et al. 2012; Chelcea 2003; Haukanes and Pine 2005; Petryna 2002; Phillips 2011; Read and Thelen 2007; Rivkin-Fish 2005, 2011; Stanisz 2014; Stillo 2012; Zalewska 2009, 2010). In other world regions, studies of kinship and care are often closely related to studies of personhood (e.g., Buch 2013; Lamb 2000); however, in postsocialist Eastern Europe, studies of personhood have been more closely related to labor than to kinship.

Specifically, anthropological research has demonstrated well how labor regimes can shape personhood. For instance, research in Hungary shows that individualized personhood existed during socialism and was related to pre-socialist capitalist labor practices (Lampland 1995). Research in postsocialist Poland demonstrates how people use relational personhood to resist the individualization of neoliberal labor management (Dunn 2004). Drawing on theoretical perspectives from South Asian and Melanesian contexts (e.g., Daniel 1984; Dumont 1980; Marriott 1976; Strathern 1988), this research relies on a binary framework that juxtaposes individual to relational models of personhood. Although these categories are shown not to easily map on to capitalist and socialist world orders (Kharkhordin 1999), the categories themselves tend to remain analytically pure. That is, the category of personhood remains part of a binary framework.

However, I argue that if we rethink personhood as a category that is inextricable from kinship relations, we can begin to escape the binary categories of socialism and postsocialism—and thus sidestep attendant, potentially divisive debates about the politics of the production of knowledge. I propose that we re-center our theoretical perspective by drawing on scholarship from outside the postsocialist paradigm, thus redefining our understanding of personhood itself.

Both classic and more recent anthropological scholarship helps to develop this understanding of personhood. Marcel Mauss’s work on both the category of the person and the gift (1985[1938], 1990[1925]) shows that personhood is fundamentally social. Practices of exchange and social relations that constitute the interactional dimension of personhood are inseparable from political economies and belief systems. Moreover, these social relations are inherently moral, involving “judgments about what the world is and should be” (Beidelman 1993[1986]: 2). More recently, Janet Carsten (2000, 2007) has shown that ties of relatedness are created through everyday practices of care and memory that are inseparable from larger political structures and histories. When personhood is studied in this processual, relational way, we no longer need to explain how personhood is part of socialist, postsocialist, or capitalist ways of being, but can instead show the daily practices

through which personhood and ties of relatedness are created, maintained, or unraveled. By dissociating personhood from monolithic political-economic categories, we can thereby destabilize these hegemonic constructions. In other words, showing how personhood is processually constructed creates opportunities for rethinking categories across scales of analysis.⁵

Moreover, because personhood in postsocialism has tended to be understood as related primarily to labor relations, other domains of life besides labor have received less analytical attention. Studies that shift the focus to people who are largely outside the labor force, such as older people, can be useful to open other analytic perspectives on personhood in Eastern Europe.

Studying aging in Poland: an overview of ethnographic fieldwork

This analysis draws on twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2006 in Wrocław and Poznań, Poland, two cities in western Poland. The longest period of research occurred between 2008-2010; I conducted follow-up research during the summers of 2012, 2013, and 2014. All research was conducted in Polish and approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB). The primary aim of this research was to understand ideals and experiences of old age in Poland, and specifically, to understand the role of historical sociopolitical transformations in shaping personhood, kinship and memory in late life. As a medical anthropologist, I have a particular interest in the way that experiences of health and illness transform personhood in old age. Towards this end, I sought a wide range of field sites in which I could meet older people of varying socioeconomic and health status.

From 2006 to 2013, my primary ethnographic field sites were educational and medical institutions for older people. In total, I interviewed over 100 people, most of whom were over the age of sixty. However, I did not specify the chronological age of participants in order to better understand the local meanings of old age. Primary institutional sites included *Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku* (Universities of the Third Age), which are continuing-education institutions specifically for older people, a *Zakład Opiekuńczo-Leczniczy o profilu rehabilitacyjnym* (Rehabilitative Care Institution), a *Dom Pomocy Społecznej dla osób przewlekłych somatycznie chorych* (Social Welfare Home for people with chronic physical illnesses), and a *Środowiskowy Dom Samopomocy dla ludzi z chorobą Alzheimera* (Day Center for people with Alzheimer's disease). In some ways, these institutions represent

5 It is not my intention to suggest that other work on personhood in postsocialist contexts omits the insights of Mauss, Beidelman, or Carsten; rather, my aim here is to focus on the processual formation of personhood that the work of these scholars highlights. Through a focus on the processual, I hope that we can see beyond the binary frameworks implied by the term "postsocialism."

starkly different ways of experiencing old age in Poland. The people who attend the Universities of the Third Age are mobile and relatively free of physical disability, while those who live in residential care institutions or attend the Alzheimer’s day center are not able to carry out so-called “activities of daily living” without assistance from others. These differences in physical ability and health have serious ramifications for social engagement in a context where the built environment limits the movement of people with disabilities. Additionally, people who attend Universities of the Third Age are generally from a higher socioeconomic status (many *sluchacze*, or attendees, are retired teachers, accountants or other professional workers), while research participants at the medical institutions were more likely to have worked as farmers or in factories.

These differing kinds of institutions (educational and medical) represent models of aging with different moral valences. Universities of the Third Age fit within an increasingly dominant cultural norm of what gerontologists have alternately called “successful,” “healthy,” or “active” aging; the last of these, “active aging,” is currently promoted by local, national, and transnational governments in Europe.⁶ Notably, 2012 was the “European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations,” and there is a Polish governmental initiative from 2014-2020 called *Rządowy Program na rzecz Aktywności Społecznej Osób Starszych* (Government Program for the benefit of Social Activity/Active-ness of Older People). These international and national programs include funding for various educational and social programs for older people (in this context “older” means over the age of sixty). Universities of the Third Age are singled out in the Polish governmental initiative as especially popular and worthy programs. Although the kinds of programs and activities offered through these initiatives are varied, the ideal of maintaining health is at least implicit, and often explicit, in such programs. Residential care institutions (and those who live there) tend to fall outside the purview of such public discourse and programs—and are thus excluded from increasingly popular normative models of old age. However, despite this exclusion, my research showed that older adults at both medical and educational institutions maintain personhood and create new social relations through remarkably similar practices of storytelling, remembering, learning and commensality (Robbins 2013b). This finding demonstrates that discursive imaginations of old age fail to capture the lived experience of daily life through which personhood and social relations are maintained, transformed and unmade.

However, this research from 2006-2013 was limited by restricting primary field sites to educational and medical institutions, which are not representative of

6 See Foster and Walker 2014 for a discussion of the difference between the North American focus on “successful” aging and the European focus on “active aging;” interestingly, in this gerontological analysis, the meaningful geographic distinctions are not West versus East, but rather North America versus Europe.

most older Polish people's daily lives, and which, as described above, have differing moral valences. Therefore, during follow-up research I sought out other kinds of social groups for older people in order to understand whether maintaining social relations and personhood is accomplished through the same kinds of daily practices as in educational and medical institutions. My goal was to understand experiences of old age that are more normative and therefore perhaps less caught up in the moralized binary construct of "active aging" and its implied opposite. Thus in the summer of 2014 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in *kluby seniora* (senior clubs) affiliated with parishes, neighborhoods, labor unions, professional societies, *domy kultury* (houses of culture) and non-governmental organizations. I also conducted interviews with older people who are not affiliated with any institution, leaders of governmental and non-governmental organizations that organize programming for older people and the editor of a newspaper for older people. During this fieldwork period, I interacted with over 90 different individuals in a range of social contexts.

In this article, I draw primarily on examples from this most recent fieldwork period in order to sidestep the more polarized moralities of both the Universities of the Third Age and the care institutions.

Generational differences, class aspirations and national connections

While studying aging in Poznań and Wrocław, I began to think of postsocialism as a useful category of practice, rather than as a category of analysis. That is, I noticed that there were many ways that divides between East/West continue to matter, or were continually reproduced, in the lives of the Poles with whom I was spending my time. In particular, there are three principal ways that postsocialism continued to matter to my research participants.

First, I noticed that many negative attributes of older people in Poland were often associated with the socialist past. I often heard negative comments from people of roughly my own age (in their late twenties to mid-thirties), who would explain anti-Semitic, racist or conservative religious comments made by an older person by saying things like, "these older people just need to die off," or "Our society won't move forward until the older generations are gone." However, such comments about anonymous older Poles contrast with the same person's warm feelings towards his or her own grandparents. That is, the animosity towards the anonymous or unknown older person, or the elderly en masse, contrasts with the warmth that people feel for specific older people that they know. In these conversations with Poles of my own age, exactly which part of the past made older people problematic for the national future was not always clear. It was often their association with the nationalist far-right and its exclusionary policies and visions, but sometimes it was the very fact of their having come of age and worked during

the socialist era that led them to have a socialist-era *mentalność*, or mentality. Regardless, it was always their association with the past that made their future inclusion suspect.

This association of older people with the socialist past is not limited to younger generations. During my fieldwork, I also heard such comments from older people themselves. For example, one *działkowiec* (allotment gardener), a man in his seventies, commented to me that many people of his generation keep a “*dystans*” (“distance”) between themselves and other people. He described this social distance as resulting from the “*zmiany ustrojowe*,” or systemic changes, that occurred after 1989, during which people were not treated fairly. He made this comment while describing his garden and pointing out a section of the *działka* (allotment) that he gives to a close friend from his “*kawalerskie czasy*” (“bachelor days”) to grow some cucumbers and tomatoes. This description of an old friend prompted a reflection on the social tendencies of older people, who keep a social distance from others. It was unclear from this conversation exactly to which kind of unfair treatment he was referring, or exactly why this came up in a description of his *działka*. I interpret this offhand remark about the social distance of older people as part of a broader culturally patterned discourse about generational differences.

I heard similar remarks from a group of older women volunteers during a conversation about the reasons why they choose to become volunteers. They cited the openness and warmth of their fellow volunteers as a contrast to other older people who only participate in activities from which they themselves benefit. That is, the volunteers understand their participation as benefiting others, not only themselves. These women volunteers explained this difference between themselves and others by saying that older people tend to have a *mentalność* that is stuck in the socialist past. The non-governmental organization through which these women met explicitly fosters *aktywność* (activity, or active-ness) in old age. This *aktywność* is contrasted to *bierność* (passivity), which was supposedly encouraged by the state socialist system. Passivity and activity thus emerge as binary kinds of *mentalność* that fit within a socialist/capitalist binary.⁷ Postsocialism here emerges as a meaningful local category, in which people are thought to be associated with the time—and political-economic formation—within which they came of age, and therefore need to change to adapt to a new era. From the perspective of these women volunteers, postsocialism means belonging to a different era than the ti-

7 The dominance—and indeed the very existence—of the categories of *aktywność* and *bierność* in both scholarship and policies on aging, as well as in the broader neoliberal order, should be challenged and subject to anthropological inquiry. Specifically, there should be a historical political-economic investigation of these categories’ dominance vis-à-vis the concept of the social. In a book manuscript currently in progress, I address this issue through more detailed ethnographic and historical consideration of *aktywność* itself. Thank you to one of the anonymous reviewers for raising this point. See Krzyżowski et al. 2014 for a sociological study of this topic among Polish retirees.

me in which one lives, and carries problematic connotations of a failure to adapt to new conditions.

Second, many older Poles, particularly those with middle- or upper-class status—or middle-/upper-class *aspirations*—regard western Europe and the United States as superior to Poland in some regards. That is, the *mentalność* that is associated with state socialism, social distance and selfishness is often seen as inferior to the *mentalność* associated with capitalism, openness and being friendly. This comparison to other countries was not just along the axis of *mentalność*, but also about the practicalities of daily living. When complaining about waiting time to see medical specialists, older people would remark to me that old age in Poland is so much worse than in other parts of Europe (Germany, Scandinavia) and the U.S. This familiar lament, that old people *elsewhere* are better off than *here*, is a common trope of talk about old age across cultures, wherein the deictics “elsewhere” and “here” are shifters that encompass locally meaningful categories. In contemporary Poland, these deictics still map on to the referents of West and East, of capitalist futures and socialist pasts.

Programs that promote *aktywność* in old age try to move people from one category to the other, to bring the *elsewhere* to *here*. At the Universities of the Third Age, institutional leaders talk about transforming older people into “Euroseniorzy,” or “Euroseniors”—that is, older people who speak English, know how to use computers, travel internationally and take responsibility for their own health (Robbins-Ruszkowski *in press*). These Euroseniorzy are seen as appropriate to the current world order; individual practices map on to particular kinds of political-economic imaginaries. The figure of the Eurosenior thus functions as an aspirational category for some older people in Poland, not only at Universities of the Third Age, but also in many social contexts in which *aktywność* and being *aktywny* are promoted or valued. In other words, aspirations towards *aktywność* are part of broader political-economic imaginaries in which older people live satisfying, fulfilling lives and achieve society-wide respect and status.

Working towards these aspirational categories can be deeply satisfying for older people who have felt stigmatized in various social contexts, both public and private (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2013). For instance, women volunteers described with great enthusiasm the activities in which they participate: organizing parties and dances for seniors, making various kinds of handicrafts (e.g., felt jewelry, decorative papers and cards), volunteering at a home for people with dementia. They see their participation in such activities as socially important in a context where media only portray younger people, not older people, as volunteers. One woman mentioned that her children and grandchildren are starting to take interest in her activities and ask her how she spends her time; she commented that it makes her glad that they are asking about her. Implicit in her comment was that until she began volunteering, her family did not take an interest in her life. In this light, volun-

teering can be seen as activity that not only creates new kinds of social relations, but also strengthens existing kin ties.

Another group of women who meet at the city-sponsored senior center to design and create period-specific costumes characterize their participation in this group as overwhelmingly positive. Several women spoke up to describe realizing their lifelong dreams of attending a formal ball, while others described continuing their previous practices of sewing. The women viewed their participation in this group as not just satisfying personal desires, but also working to change negative stereotypes of older people in Polish society. They describe their group as having a warm, open, empathetic and active atmosphere, which they contrasted to other social contexts. “Here, we don’t speak about illnesses,” said the leader of this group, suggesting that talk about illness is otherwise the norm. Several women then went on to describe how they cared for others (parents, neighbors) through difficult illnesses to death, and mentioned their own struggles with particular diseases. Lurking in this conversation was the figure of the old woman waiting in line to see a doctor, a stereotype that I have heard invoked again and again as a contrast to social organizations that promote *aktywność*. Across diverse forms of social organizations for older people, the sentiment dominated that *these* groups were somehow better than *other*, everyday kinds of social interactions. In these groups, people seem to be striving for something beyond the everyday; often, this striving takes on connotations of transforming social relations towards an affiliative ideal in which people choose their activities and friends, rather than associating with others only because they share place of work or residence.

Finally, some older people draw upon Poland’s socialist past as a crucial element of Poland’s national status as the long-suffering Christ of nations, which always gives of itself to help others, but receives no help in return. As part of a national narrative of suffering, which also includes the histories of partitions, uprisings and world wars, socialism becomes another chapter of oppression by outside forces. Depending on their political views, some older Poles can view EU membership as yet another chapter in this tale of suffering and struggle, while others view EU membership as a sign of progress and as evidence of Poland regaining its natural place in the world order. Inasmuch as these tales of suffering are part of older Poles’ understandings of themselves as moral persons (Robbins 2013a), the categories of socialism and postsocialism function as meaningful moral categories for older people in Poland.

Socialism and postsocialism became most evident as moral categories during conversations that turned into life stories. It was not uncommon during fieldwork that I would ask about people’s experiences of old age, and, in response, hear what seemed to be their entire life stories, often going back to the war. This tended to happen most often when I was sitting alone with someone, rather than in a group, and also with people who spent more time alone. One recent experience very well

exemplifies the moral dimensions of life stories and categories of socialism and postsocialism. I met Pani Małgorzata, an 86-year-old woman who lives alone in a small one-room apartment in an apartment block in Wrocław, through a friend who lives in the same building.⁸ My friend suggested that Pani Małgorzata would be glad to help me learn about non-institutional experiences of aging. She is almost entirely blind and leaves the apartment rarely, only with the assistance of others. After I explained my research, Pani Małgorzata began speaking and did not stop for eight hours. She thought I had been sent by God, because her priest had recommended that someone record her stories. That day, I learned about the suffering of both her family and Poland. She interwove personal and national stories—or perhaps more precisely, these national stories *were* personal. Topics included: her successful escapes from what should have been certain death during the war; her schizophrenic and violent first husband; the suffering of Poland during World War II and after; Poland’s “two great leaders” (Józef Piłsudski, the interwar Polish leader, and Lech Kaczyński, the president who was killed in the tragic 2010 plane crash); the supposed conspiracy by Donald Tusk, the then prime minister, to kill Kaczyński; her ability to predict certain events, such as the plane crash, the murder of Jerzy Popiełuszko (a priest active in the opposition Solidarity movement in the 1980s who was murdered by the state secret police), and the moment of her father-in-law’s death; her ability to save lives and cure people (including strangers) through the laying on of hands, *bioprąd* (bioenergy), and *stawienie baniek* (cupping). For eight hours, these stories poured out of her, one after another, each told with a life-and-death intensity.

In her narration, stories about family members were told in the same breath as stories about political figures: Piłsudski, Kaczyński, Popiełuszko. She described a sense that her own life had been saved by miracles, that she had been chosen by God, that she had special powers. In these stories, I see an intense desire to have her agency recognized, to have these miracles recognized, as a process of witnessing. For her—and for others who told similar stories—her life is lived in a national context. There is no personal outside of the political, or vice versa. Indeed, she told a story about the deceased president, Lech Kaczyński, as a child, as if he were her own child.

Although these stories seem extreme or perhaps attributable to eccentricity, I interpret Pani Małgorzata as an exemplar of one of the many older Poles I know whose personhood is fundamentally national. This particular strand of intense Catholic nationalism combined with conspiracy theories is promoted by the far-right conservative nationalist party that is supported by people of her generation and gender. The church and priests also promote these views (sermons often comment on political issues). However, older people across the political spectrum al-

8 *Pani* is the formal term of address in Polish for women.

so tend to narrate their life in this way, to hook their own stories of suffering and joy, of life and death, onto national moments of the same. I see this narrative style, so common among older people in Poland as a way of creating a good, moral life, in which kin are both personal and national. Shared emotions make historical figures into kin; the national past becomes family history. In this context, postsocialism and socialism are time periods with particular moral valences; this morality comes from both personal and national contexts.

It is for these reasons—generational differences, class aspirations and intense connections between personhood and nationhood—that we should not discard postsocialism as a topic of study. If we understand postsocialism-in-practice to mean how people in Central-Eastern Europe reflect on contrasts between political-economic, temporal, and spatial histories and imaginations, it is evident that these distinctions continue to matter in significant ways. Therefore, if we carefully investigate postsocialism as an ethnographic category, as a category of practice, we can move on to other categories of analysis (personhood, kinship, care, memory) that may be more generative and allow for more creative possibilities of understanding life in Central and Eastern Europe.

Postscript: Reflexive considerations on postsocialism as a topic of inquiry

For all my concerns with postsocialism as a category of analysis, it is only fair to note that the category did play some role in my own entry to this topic of study. As I was beginning graduate school and contemplating in which region of the world I should locate my study of aging and memory, I was fascinated by the large-scale changes in Eastern Europe (here I say “Eastern” rather than “Central-Eastern,” since for me at the time it was most certainly the East). It was 2004 and the European Union was expanding to include many countries of the former socialist bloc. I was intrigued by the idea that these countries were making such radical “transitions” from socialism to capitalism, from East to West—even though I had only vague, stereotypical ideas of what these changes actually signified, or how socialist or capitalist societies actually functioned. But I knew that global and national political-economic transformations were occurring, and that many such changes had occurred in the course of the lifetimes of the oldest generations in the region. I had a hunch that this history of large-scale change would provide a fruitful context to understand experiences and ideals of aging and memory. In other words, it was a binary East/West, socialism/capitalism, Cold War framework that allowed me even to conceive of this project.

However, there was another dimension to my initial development of this project. Like many anthropologists and academics, I have a personal connection to my research. My academic interest in aging and memory began with my paternal grandmother’s experience of Alzheimer’s disease. From the moment of dia-

gnosis, she became a different person within our family; every utterance and action was interpreted through the lens of the diagnosis. The diagnosis of Alzheimer's crossed temporal boundaries in surprising ways, stretching into the past as an explanatory logic for any odd behavior, and guaranteeing that the future would be marked by further decline and horrors. As time passed and I began to think about my grandmother from an anthropological perspective (anthropology as therapy?), I learned that all this was not specific to my own family, but was rather an indicator of the status of Alzheimer's in the contemporary United States (Cohen 1998). If I want to understand similar kinds of experiences among older people in Poland—how power can change among kin relations, how moral authority can shift within families, how personhood can be transformed or even erased—I cannot find explanations only in etic binary frameworks based on macro-level political-economic change. Nor can I find such explanations in scholarly debates about the utility of these frameworks. Rather, I find theories of kinship and personhood more valuable in explaining these intimate transformations.

However, understanding the intimacies of kinship and personhood does not mean eschewing political-economic perspectives. Indeed, as recent scholarship (McKinnon and Cannell 2013) in kinship studies demonstrates, everyday, intimate, and remembered practices of relatedness are not isolated from political-economic spheres, but are rather inseparable from such formations. This insight about the interconnectedness of domains is fundamental to anthropology as a discipline; indeed, deconstructing the categories through which we and our research participants know the world has long been a central goal of the field. However, the modernist tendency to view kinship as separate from politics proves to be a particularly difficult categorical separation to avoid. It is towards this end of breaking down artificial categorical distinctions that I present the above critical self-reflection. Perhaps by investigating our own personal motivations for research on Central and Eastern Europe that lie outside East/West socialist/capitalist frameworks, we can move towards a more nuanced and less polarized understanding of post-socialist persons, relations and worlds.

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