

Reforms and Cosmologies: Redefining Popular Governance

Day 2- Stream 1: Times: 14.30-16.00; 16.30-18.00 (Gellner Room)

Rapporteurs: Prof. Don Kalb, Prof. Calin Goina

Participants and discussants: Gábor Halmai (Prof. Douglas R. Holmes), Mariya Ivancheva (Prof. Calin Goina), Raluca Pernes (Prof. David Berliner), Viorel Anastasoae (Prof. Susana Narotzky)

This panel is concerned with alternative ways and creative means deployed by various actors that all seek to influence their respective states located in the imaginative space called the Global South. Exploring both the paradoxes that surface in elite as well as grassroots movements in Venezuela and Brazil, furthermore, the moral debates on state actions and the resulting revolutionary cosmologies that emerge in food crisis-stricken contemporary Cuba will be analyzed as well. Moving away from the struggles arising in the old and new socialist states of Latin America, a fourth paper explores public contentions over land use in today's Ghana, where legal pluralism has opened up space for claims towards a state that is not fully able to take charge of land management.

The first paper included in the panel examines how the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement attempts to keep its members engaged in the larger 'struggle' for socialism, while being forced to address antagonisms such as camp dweller vs. settled landholder, bureaucrat vs. activist, or rural peasant vs. urban favela-dweller. An additional paper poses the question as to how suitable a Western-style institution - that is, the university - actually proves to be as a place for radical social reform. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in Caracas, here we encounter professors working at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela who are faced with the dilemma of either becoming a functionary intellectual clique of a centralizing state, or succumbing to a role of critical opposition that stands almost no chance of bringing about profound social change. Intense and complex challenges brought up against a rather reluctant state are being explored in a third paper, which takes us to a peri-urban town in Ghana, where fierce competition for land between local residents and the government exposes the strength of smaller actors who manage to exploit the heavy-handedness of their opponent. Finally, based on ethnographic data coming from fieldwork carried out in Cuba, the last paper explores the political and moral meanings of food production as envisioned by local peasants. Food, which in the words of the Cuban leadership is an issue of "maximal national security", at the same time is also understood as a mnemonic device triggering significant symbolic associations and reflections on the Revolution.

Gábor Halmai: Towards a New Society? Direct Democracy Practices among the Brazilian Landless

The Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) is one of the largest social movements in the world. Its objective has evolved beyond the "simple" goal of achieving land reform in a country that is still characterized by an extremely unequal colonial land property structure and tens of millions of starving sharecroppers. After more than 25 years of struggle, the main "dream" of the more than one million landless families is allegedly to create an alternative society, namely "socialism." For this to happen, they have created a complex mixture of structures of participatory and representative democracy at all levels of the movement's functioning from the base camps to the national coordination bodies.

Having conducted participant observation-based research in the movement camps and settlements around Porto Alegre, the city most famous for its participatory budget initiative, I will sketch the main victories accomplished and challenges faced by the (post-)socialist initiative of the MST in the 21st century. As the movement has achieved the most successes

in this southern region, the shift of identities from landless camp dweller to proprietor creates an enormous strain on the MST as it tries to keep its participants involved in the larger “struggle” for socialism, a dubious goal for the smallholders who are rather striving to gain more profit than simple sustenance from their plots. Similarly, besides the camp dweller-settled landholder dichotomy, the movement also has to deal with the bureaucrat vs. activist and the rural peasant vs. urban favela-dweller antagonisms. (How) Can an organization built essentially on bottom-up and egalitarian principles cope with such difficulties? Is it possible to reconcile the overtly conservative peasant ideals with the more inclusive socialist ideology without compromising the umbrella identity of campones? To what extent can the bottom-up structure of MST leadership prevent the reproduction of political hierarchies? Is there a finite scale for socialism to function? These are the main issues my paper will attempt to tackle.

Mariya Ivancheva: Socialist Intellectuals in the University Reform of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

The figure of the socialist intellectual is charged with a peculiar theoretical paradox. While socialist intellectuals strive for a society without class distinctions, the term ‘intellectual’ is a form of class distinction. While mass universities can theoretically change this equation, the attendant devaluation of academic degrees and reduced quality of education has often led to frustration among academic intellectuals. And while radical intellectuals in the West have been locked in permanent opposition to the establishment, intellectual participation in politics in the developing world has mostly led to disillusionment with intellectuals allowing their egalitarian projects to be side-tracked into authoritarian political regimes.

To address this paradox this paper presents some results of extensive field research carried out in Caracas (in October 2008-June 2009), with the specific field site of the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV). I have conducted qualitative research (interviews, participant observation) with intellectuals and experts in the intellectual field around the UBV – the vanguard university of the higher education reform of the Bolivarian government of Hugo Chavez. UBV has claimed a primacy in the alternative knowledge production and has created alter-globalization driven alliances with anti-American powers in the global non-West. It was designed by a group of radical intellectuals and aimed to provide social integration of ‘the wretched of the world.’ Yet, paradoxically, this intellectual project and its actors are more and more criticized by Chavista experts and by their own students as reproducing - rather than challenging - the traditional model of university institution.

These accusations have highlighted the dilemma that critically illuminates the problematic role of intellectuals in socialist societies. UBV professors face a dilemma as intellectuals torn between becoming a functionary intellectual clique of a centralizing state, and succumbing to a role of critical opposition that stands little or no chance of carrying out profound social reform. This conflict also introduces the question how suitable an exclusive, modern, Western institution (e.g. the university) actually is for a locus of radical social reform?

Raluca Pernes: State Authority or the Lack Thereof: Norms and Practices in the Management of Peri-Urban Lands in Southern Ghana

The conversion of farm land to residential plots in peri-urban Ghana has brought about challenges that are more complex and widespread than at any time before in the history of land management in this area. A situation of legal pluralism, complicated even more by the process of reinvention and redefinition of tradition and custom, as well as increasingly

stronger neoliberal influences, entails that the role of the state in land administration is pressured into changes in response to the current constellation of circumstances. The aim of this paper is to dissect the inner workings of the land tenure system with the purpose of revealing what happens behind the self-assigned position of the state. Having somewhat withdrawn from the day-to-day management of land by acknowledging the authority of traditional leaders, the state is nevertheless an insider, as the authority behind land registrations, the only agent capable of land requisitions and, just as prominently in this period, through its over-worked courts of law.

I will briefly look at the history of land management and distribution in the Gold Coast and Ghana since the 19th century, before investigating the contemporary state of affairs through the lens of a particular case – a peri-urban town in the south of the country – where intense competition for land leads to numerous situations where laws, regulations, and practices are being questioned.

The current debates on land management in situations of legal pluralism are dominated by the rhetoric of the marginalization of the powerless, opposed by the view that customary systems are flexible and adaptable. While acknowledging the difficulties typically ensuing from these situations, both perspectives disregard current practices, which tend to gravitate towards the margins of the laws/rules and more often than not fall completely outside of them. This will constitute the background against which I build my argument that, while capable of using and abusing its power in certain areas, the state nevertheless lacks the authority and the practical skills to single-handedly set the agenda for future practices in land management.

Viorel Anastasoiaie: Viorel Anastasoiaie: Food Production in Contemporary Rural Cuba: Household Subsistence, Revolutionary Renunciation and Socialist Changes

Food is, in the words of Cuban president Raul Castro, an issue of “maximal national security”. This is typical of a more pragmatic turn of the Cuban leadership after the retirement of Fidel Castro on domestic reforms aiming at reducing the food imports (Cuba imports 70% of its food), while increasing the productivity of Cuban agriculture. In this paper I would like to explore the significance of food provisions in rural Cuba, by studying the ways in which its production is embedded in the web of social relations of kinship, neighbourhood and labour. At the same time, I am exploring the political and moral meanings of the state distribution of food seen by peasants who responded to an initiative for voluntary renunciation of their rationing quotas of rice and beans in the context of food price inflations in 2008. In the last part of the paper, I will bring about some symbolic associations between food and Revolution, exploring the way food is remembered and invoked in discussing the transformations that took place in people’s life in the last 50 years. Following recent contribution in the anthropological study of food, I show how talking about and remembering food can illuminate the way people evaluate larger social and political processes.