Sociology 455: Post-Socialist Societies
Fall 2023

Class Location: LEA 808
Class Meeting Time: Tuesdays 9:35-11:25 a.m.
Professor: Elaine Weiner
Office Address: LEA 732
Office Hours: Fridays 12:30-1:30 p.m. or by appointment
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Course Description

The demise of Communist Party rule transpiring between 1989 and 1991 throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union meant that the systemic communist-capitalist (and democratic) rivalry which typified much of the twentieth century gave way to new economic, political and social realities. In this course, we consider some of the societal consequences of these dramatic economic and political changes. We begin by examining some of the conditions which led to state socialism’s collapse. For the majority of the course, however, we will focus on the social ramifications of the triad of reforms in the post-socialist world known as privatization, marketization and democratization and how the post-1989 period can be understood as success and/or failure.

Course Materials

Most course materials are available via myCourses. You should, however, use the URL links on this syllabus to link to assigned podcasts, videos, documentaries, etc. for listening and/or viewing.


Course Organization and Requirements

Class format: Seminar

Watch & Read

These are the kinds of questions you should be thinking about as you are watching and reading assigned materials in order to best process them:

1. What is/are the main point(s)?
2. What kind of evidence is relied on in order to make the point(s)? What are the strengths and/or weaknesses of evidence used/arguments made?
3. What are the larger implications of the point(s) made?

Course Requirements:

Attendance = 10%
Participation = 10%
Discussion Facilitation = 10%
Paper #1 (Considering ‘Consumption’) = 20% (due November 3rd, submit via myCourses ‘Assignments’ link)
Paper #2 (Is ‘Post-Socialism’ Still Relevant?) = 25% (due Tuesday, December 12th, submit via myCourses ‘Assignments’ link)
‘Taking Stock of Shock’ Presentations = 25% (Note: 25% of this grade will be based on peer evaluation)

1 In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.
Late Submission Policy

For each day that an assignment is late, the grade will be lowered by half a grade (e.g., if the initial grade is a B- and you submit the assignment a day late, your final paper grade will be a C+).

Participation

Class participation is an integral component of this course. The goal, for all of us, is to create a mutually respectful space in which everyone feels comfortable sharing their ideas, asking questions, etc… (even if they are not, in your estimation, particularly brilliant or profound).

Discussion Facilitation

Listed below are some guidelines as to how to prepare for this role.

Guidelines:
Facilitating a discussion requires that you be familiar with the assigned materials. Familiarity does not, however, mean mastery. The main purpose of class discussion is to move everyone together towards mastery. In order to prepare yourself to facilitate you should:

- read and study the assigned materials (e.g., underlining important and/or interesting points, writing notes/comments/questions in the margins)
- contemplate and jot down the main issues raised by the author(s) and a few questions relating to these issues (e.g., what do you find provocative, controversial, confusing, etc…?)
- prepare a ~10-15 minute presentation which:
  - summarizes the main points/issues/arguments of assigned readings (providing an outline to your classmates may be helpful) – NO WRITTEN SUMMARIES
  - relates the readings to ideas covered in previous discussions, etc.
  - ends with the identification of several discussion questions/issues in order to launch the class discussion (again, providing a list of questions/issues to your classmates might be beneficial in facilitating discussion)

Papers

#1 Considering ‘Consumption’

Drawing on readings from weeks #7 and #8 and one of the two films below (available online or via the HSSL library), you are to address the following in essay format:

The lives of people in North America are so saturated with ideas and practices relating to consumption that we might not see how introducing these ideas and practices into another context, such as Eastern Europe, might prove challenging. Explain how consumption has been (and continues to be) transformed in the region in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1989 and 1991.

Due Friday, November 3rd by midnight (submit via myCourses’ Assignments’ link).

Films (choose one):
Goodbye Lenin! (2003) available via various streaming platforms (e.g., AppleTV)

#2 Is ‘Postsocialism’ Still Relevant?

While some contend that the postsocialist era is ‘over and done’ (and so enough talking about it!), others contend that it remains a useful “analytic” (Dunn and Verdery 2015). Your task in this reaction paper (~8 pages + references) is to argue for or against the continued relevance of this concept. You should rely on the readings from Week #13 as well as any other readings from the course that you find useful. However,
I also expect you to do a bit of additional research in order to answer this question as there are certainly a number of other scholars who have weighed in on this question (i.e., incorporate at least additional two scholarly works).

Due Tuesday, December 12, by midnight ((submit via via myCourses ‘Assignments’ link).

**FORMATTING GUIDELINES (FOR RESPONSE PAPERS):**

- 11-12 point font
- double-spaced
- 1-inch margins
- citations required (APA or ASA style)

“Taking Stock of Shock” Mitchell Orenstein and Kristen Ghodsee’s 2021 book, *Taking Stock of Shock: Social Consequences of the 1989 Revolutions* (New York: Oxford University Press) considers, from various perspectives, how the demise of Community party rule in Eastern Europe can be variably understood as a success and/or failure. You will be divided into four groups. Each group will be responsible for ‘teaching’ the content of one of the book’s four parts to the class, during weeks 11 and 12. Each group will have 30 minutes of teaching time and 10 minutes for Q & A. (Note: you may also find this presentation by the authors given at the University of Cologne in December 2021 interesting [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-hKB9cPj3o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-hKB9cPj3o)).

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)).

**Course Schedule**

**Week 1: September 5**

**INTRODUCTION**

NO MATERIALS ASSIGNED

**Week 2: September 12**

**POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SOCIALISM**

- 1998. “Episode #2: Iron Curtain” CNN Cold War Series ~ 45 minutes (on reserve at HSSL library - can be viewed in the HSSL course reserves room with the remote controls available at the front desk – or you may find online)


Week 3: September 19

**POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SOCIALISM (continued)**

- 1998. “Episode 23 and 24: The Wall Comes Down” and “Conclusions” CNN Cold War Series ~ 45 minutes each (on reserve at HSSL library - can be viewed in the HSSL course reserves room with the remote controls available at the front desk – or you may find online)


Week 4: September 26

**COMMUNISM'S COLLAPSE**


Week 5: October 3

**PRIVATIZATION**


**In-Class Exercise: Privatizing “Balima”**

Week 6: October 17

**CORRUPTION AND CRIME**


Week 7: October 24

**MARKETIZATION: CREATING CONSUMERS**


Week 8: October 31 (N)OSTALGIE


Week 9: November 7 DEMOCRATIZATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY


Week 10: November 14 (GENDER) BACKLASH


Weeks 11 and 12: November 21 and November 28 “TAKING STOCK OF SHOCK”


Week 13: December 5 IS ‘POST-SOCIALISM’ STILL RELEVANT TODAY?


