

Mythical Discoveries, Utopian Spaces and Post-Socialist Culture

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When Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492 to discover India, he discovered America. The America which he discovered was of course totally different from what he or those coming after him expected (not to mention the case of mistaken identity). His relation to the newly discovered land and its peoples ranged from the wonder of the totally unexpected and different, to the »unexpected recognition« of the known from Europe and other then known places. He read the identity of the discovered places and people »in his own mirror«. In this binary division into the »known« and the »other« – this »other« to be integrated into the »known« – the crucial question so far has been mostly on which side of this relationship was our own position, for this position determined whether the »other« was to be changed by us or whether we found ourselves in the role of this »other« – to be changed by somebody else.

This is not America

In Central and East European countries America was for a long time a haven to which people escaped also for political, but mainly for economic reasons. Those who came back to Europe were mostly relatively well off, when compared to their fellow countrymen. In the collective consciousness of these countries America was primarily, as the Americans themselves have written in their schoolbooks, »the land of opportunity«. You took risks and they paid off. The older generation of people in Slovenia used the exclamation »America!« not long ago to express something positive, success, wealth, etc. using the word in a sense similar to »Bingo!«

Another meaning of America, appearing of course much later, lay in the America of the Vietnam war, as the culprit of events that to a large extent homogenized the Left and certainly also linked the American Left with the European one.

The just mentioned presentation of America as the great foe coincided with the self-representation of certain European countries as socialist, although the degree to which this was true varied enormously: socialism in Slovenia or former Yugoslavia, due to the self-management socialist system, remained a

viable option long after, for example, the obvious decay and disintegration of Polish socialism which caused the term there to become a totally disreputable one.

The historical events that took place in the eighties have sped up these political events enormously. The second half of the eighties really were »The Years of Denouement«, to use the title of a book by Slobodan Milošević from a few years ago.

After the dismantling of socialism in »Eastern Europe« the road to capitalism was swiftly taken. After the initial enthusiasm the speed of these changes in different countries began to vary, depending not only upon their economic, social and historical conditions and ensuing internal political contradictions but also upon the intensity of their discovery that capitalism does have a »dark« side, i.e., the one previously so unconvincingly stressed by party ideologues.

The appearance of fast food chains¹ and of almost anything Western was taken especially by the younger generation uncritically. The ideal of a consumer society has begun to draw in the younger section of the population for whom ideals of brotherhood, fraternity and equality have become empty slogans negated in every segment of their everyday lives. National traditions became alternatives to the different kinds of decaying socialism. Even former kingdoms could become a point of reference and of support for different »imagined communities« and especially for national homogenizations. In countries which never existed as separate states similar aspirations could become strong driving forces for attaining such a status.

What we encounter currently in many of these countries is a mimicry of the »American way« mixed with fear of the same capitalist greed, especially as the capitalism perceived in them is not capitalism accompanied by a minimal social safety net which exists in West European countries. What is emerging there is often a primeval free market capitalism, with foreign and especially local entrepreneurs² trying to earn as much as possible in the shortest time possible. It is thus no coincidence that this area is known now as the »Wild East«, the new frontier, where you can make it quickly, usually without bothering about morals consistent with the laws of most of the capitalist countries. Equally important is that certain morals were an integral part of the

1. When the McDonald's appeared in Moscow a few years ago it was called the »slow food« for you had to wait an hour to make your order. The hamburgers (and even the paper bags) became a signifier of social status, with a hamburger costing 5 rubles when the average salary was 160 rubles.
2. With »yummies« (young upward mobile – former – Marxists) preceding the nascent local yuppies.

collective spirit of the previous socialist system which guaranteed a minimum of everyday security.

An initial fascination with the West has given way to an unease, manifesting itself in a cautious approach towards Western investments and towards appropriating the »West« and its ways. In short, in trying to find some middle ground between the two realities, formerly exemplified by the terms of capitalism and socialism, be it of the real socialist or the self-management type.

The same phenomenon appeared in the sphere of the social sciences, art, and culture. If the Central European countries found it easy to revert to their own theoretical heritage from before the World War II, in the former Soviet Union this was not the case. There the only theoretical heritage (with the exception of locally unimportant and rather exotic theories like structuralism of the Tartu School, of politically eliminated Russian formalism, or of locally almost unknown authors like Mikhail Bakhtin) was either Marxism-Leninism of the orthodox sort or the Russian tradition of the nineteenth century which was for the most part anti-cosmopolitan, anti-Western and anti-enlightenment oriented, with its perception of the peasant way of life as a sane and healthy ideal. Nikolai A. Berdyaev, Lev N. Tolstoy and even Georgi V. Plekhanov can all be situated in this line of reasoning.

When Russian futurism, usually viewed as a cosmopolitan art form erupted at the beginning of this century, it very soon became divided into the nationalist, »Eastern«, primitive part (personified by Victor V. Khlebnikov) and the cosmopolitan (defended among others by Vladimir V. Mayakovski). A similar phenomenon occurred in the then newly formed Yugoslavia after World War I when Lubomir Micić devised the so-called »Balkan barbarogenius« whose main traits were opposition to everything Western. In this way the old Russian (and Orthodox) suspicion of Western civilization emerged also in art.

For obvious reasons Marxism-Leninism ceased being theoretically relevant. In all the former socialist countries even mentioning Marxism, or theories connected with Marx, or relying on his theory, is now considered unacceptable. The theoretical void is being only partially replaced by acquiring Western, usually more empirical and practically oriented social science perspectives. A large majority of people working in the social sciences and in cultural institutions from these countries cannot compete on the international intellectual market no more that these countries can compete on an economic market. Also, the state has in most cases taken away the previous, relatively strong financial support. What remains is usually what can find a market and what can (which usually means the same thing) enhance the national or international standing of the existing or the emerging nation-states. This process really

functions through an often unconscious system of state apparatuses and often also through the strong nationalism of many of the intellectuals.

Russia nowadays can hardly present its Marxist-Leninist heritage as something that could be offered internationally. The same applies to the nineteenth century authors, who long ago became a part of world culture. What can be promoted in the electronic age are visual arts and among these especially those works which have retained or are connected with the aura of the Russian avant-garde art from the beginning of this century. In them a universal visual language is being used which can refer to the already known and established works and artists. Such works may therefore play an important role in international culture. This fascination is often of a limited range – something that the artists of the *sots-art* have discovered the hard way, as the market for their paintings, sculptures and installations became glutted due to excessive supply and the total unpreparedness of the Russian artists and their official institutions to direct the market.³

In most of the former socialist countries of Central Europe art turned international (as in the time of the neo-avant-gardes of the fifties and the sixties) or revived its national past, bringing to the fore forgotten, discarded or reinterpreted works, be they from the avant-gardist or nationalist and populist past. This last observation certainly applies to Russia, to Hungary and to Slovenia.

One of the first consequences of the unexpected »withering away« of the socialist state was the rapid decline of financial support. Former socialist countries, following the values of the enlightenment ascribed to culture a special place, even if this place was at the same time kept under strict control and supervision. Thus, paradoxically, the most »bourgeois« art genres like ballet were perceived as the highest art forms. In accordance with this conservative and populist modernist tradition art and culture consisted of two, mutually hardly compatible poles: of high, elitist art on one side and popular (as a rule based on local and national traditions) on the other, with hardly anything in between. Mass and trivial popular culture were perceived as kitch and not worthy of being seriously taken into consideration, although such an approach did not diminish their enormous influence among people. One of the crucial changes which occurred after the dismantling of socialism was that the aura of dissidence, of opposing the system, was taken away from artists. Previously art and culture played a crucial role in opposing the totalitarian system and were rare areas of the social field where opposing voices could be enunciated.⁴

3. Cf. for example the criticism of the then existing situation in the art market and its organisation in the Soviet Union in the interview with Leonid Bajanov by Anka Ptaszkowska »La rencontre Urss-Occident – quinze questions« in: *Art press*, no. 135, April 1989, pp. 15-20.

Often former writers became active politicians, thus seemingly drawing the modernist author to his final social function: in the future the modernist dissident writer and artist, as a writer or an artist, will have to adapt to his or her postmodern political irrelevance. Following the dialectics of Hegel's master and servant we could say that both were a part of the same political and social totality which they helped to subvert and finally eliminate.

The artists from the former socialist countries and the majority of people connected with the culture establishment viewed the West – be it Western Europe or the US – with wonder and awe: with wonder, because of the possibilities unimagined in the disintegrating Eastern bloc, because of the financial and social rewards reaped by (some) artists in the Western artworld(s) and because of the mythical aura connected with the West, usually presented through the media. In these countries for a long time the media played a different role than in the West, a fact that was due not only to the control exerted upon the media but also to its almost premodernist condition. Although the situation has changed, the presentation of the Western artworld has, in this respect, not altered significantly.⁵

Artists viewed the situation in the West with awe and fear because of the social and individual insecurity of art and culture under capitalism. Artists who did not wait for the project of »real socialism« to collapse have learned how to function within the international art establishment, while the large majority, used to governmental support and especially to their artificially protected environments, have found it impossible to adapt to a changed situation.

In many respects artists shared the experience of the general populations of their countries in their contact with the West. As this experience is a collective one, disseminated through individuals, and as the individual national groups are extremely varied, general conclusions are hard to draw. In cases where the advent of capitalism was abrupt, artists usually diverted to other jobs. In certain countries it seems as if today nobody is interested in art anymore, but just in earning money fast and in a big way – if it can be done. Those who are interested in art cannot afford it and those who can, are not interested in it.

Today the imaginary US have drifted away: in the present time in most of the

4. For this reason writers like Alexandr Soljenitsin, Milan Kundera or Vaclav Havel have been such crucial figures in their countries and have exerted such political influence as well.
5. In recent years the greatest influence was probably played by television. In many instances in countries which were practically without direct contact with people from non-socialist countries the public perceived the hyperreality offered by television (MTV, for example) for all practical purposes as the reality of the West. This was made possible by the unique feature of the electronically mediated messages. As Mark Poster notes, television creates new speech situations, »the television set is a new speech context«. – Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 45.

former socialist countries the real imaginary »America« and the real »land of opportunity« is the Europe of the 12 stars. At the same time this Europe/ »America« is subject to an ambivalent evaluation, for it is perceived as danger, risk or the unknown on the one hand and as a chance, an opportunity, the possibility for success, for »really-making-it« on the other. Because the differences between the two Europes are enormous and because Western Europe was formerly mythologised, the latter holds a special position in the minds of most of the Europeans from the former East bloc. In this respect its image is quite unlike that of the lower classes in the Western Europe for these encounter most of the extreme realities of capitalism in their everyday lives.

When Columbus discovered America the discovery also worked the other way around: the indigenous »Indians« discovered the Europeans. What we witness in the present situation is a new phenomenon: the people, the artists from the former East bloc, are discovering the mythical El Dorado of America and especially Europe the hard way. They want to become a part of it without becoming its third world. As in other areas, in art too, those who will retain a position or strengthen it will be those who will be able to maximize use of local specifics in a global (primarily European) setting. It remains to be seen whether the present events will ever find their enunciation and articulation in art. So far this has not been the case. So far what these artists have done is to deconstruct their own national and ideological pasts using in this procedure a mix of postmodern irony and distancing. The crucial moment will emerge when they will have to cease working on and drawing from the present period of transition and start creating in a new context which will be neither the old context of socialist realism nor covert satire, neither that of the period of the collapse and disintegration of the real or self-management socialism, nor that of the well-established West European art establishment and of its ways. Most probably Western art will also change under the influence of these events.

Encountering the East

To speak about the epistemological heritage of the encounter of Europe with the outside world – including the Americas – means speaking also about the encounter with Eastern Europe. This is even more true if we refer to integrational processes and disintegrational procedures, and last but not least, to the wars raging in the Balkans and in the former Soviet Union. It is these facts and changes in the East that have brought about a new view on Europe.

There exists a certain manner of reading the East, of this, so far still »unknown« land. »Eastern Europe« has always been subjected to different readings. It was often viewed as a land of romantic, mythological events. Seen through a Marxist-Leninist filter, technological backwardness offered the myth

of a grand brotherly community and total sexual freedom (which was, due to its materialist nature, devoid of ethics and morals and thus capable of the worst sins) or of an exclusively totalitarian project and of a realization of the Eastern despotism⁶ in which poverty, misery, mucus and blood decant incessantly. It is exactly this last myth that nowadays presents itself in its most horrible form, for it is moving from the realm of the symbolic into the realm of the real, while we all still aspire it to remain a Western phantasmagoria. The events in former Yugoslavia, first in Slovenia, then in Croatia and now in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the materialization, the entry of the real into the place of the symbolic.

Reading of the East on the part of the West is exemplified by an absence of communication and with the attitude of »looking but not seeing, listening but not hearing«. ⁷ This last attitude has continued throughout most of the present in which people in the former Yugoslavia die by the tens of thousands and take refuge by the millions. Although all this is happening in the heart of Europe this same Europe can repudiate this European heartland for it has renamed it the »Balkans«. Due to recent atrocious events some people have given up the pleasure of their contemplative and philosophical reading. The East is a stranger for Western Europe. It is someone who steals from us (from you!) or endangers the national substance of the emerging united Europe. Every construction of the »foreigner« requires somebody who steals or endangers our national substance. We witness an »obsession with the foreigner who has a unique relation to the pleasure«. ⁸

Events in the Balkans have taken their course in a rational manner, but, as Slavoj Žižek formulated, »Balkan is rational, what is irrational is the view the West has about these events.« ⁹ According to him, nationalism is the »back side« of real socialist systems and not a reaction to the demise of communism.

What we propose here when we refer to utopian spaces is a change in the starting position. The ever repeating phrase how to read »their identity in our

6. That this »Asian« or »Eastern« feature did not fit easily into Marx's presentation of history of the class society witnesses his ambiguous presentation of Asian despotism and its mode of production.

7. We have mentioned that the perception of the West on the part of the East was erroneous and very specific. The same applies the other way around: because of the extreme informational blockade of the Eastern bloc numerous activities, which took place in the Soviet Union, in Czecho-Slovakia, in Romania or Bulgaria and Poland were perceived only as far as they have been presented and represented in the West. If anything was known, it was known only insofar as the media absorbed them and presented them.

8. Slavoj Žižek, »Dobili smo tisto, kar smo hoteli« (»We Got What We Wanted«), *Delo*, Ljubljana, 27 June 1992, p. 21.

9. Žižek, op. cit.

own mirrors»,¹⁰ where »their« represents the third world, the socialist and East European countries, and »our own mirrors« represents the Western Europe and the North America, should be changed: instead of accepting the until now only valid option of reading »the East in the mirror of the West«, let us ask ourselves how the East reads the West and especially how the East reads itself?

For the East one topic is typical: the reappropriation of history. The whole socialist machine was aimed at neutralizing the side effects of a pertinent interpretation of its reality and of art production, at covering up, at effacement or renaming of history. At the discursive level this was a struggle for the formation and the interpretation of the history of the East, for a reappropriation of the history of socialisms by the East as well as by the West.

What we are dealing with here now is a deconstruction and a renewed construction of the same History, but a History that is now augmented with thoughts, images and facts which were so far inexpressible. The possibility for achieving this aim owes a lot to the emergence of the concept of the so-called »border cultures«. This term refers to physical as well as spiritual borders, to borders between countries and to intrinsic borders – linguistic, ethnic, ethical, racial, tribal and sexual.

Our intention is to speak not so much about the multiculturalism and East West relations as about this intermediary situation, when the East is still the East and when it is still acquiring its bastardly Western form. What we are interested in is the »internal multiculturalism« being engendered beyond the neocolonial positions of the West, the one that lives »here«, but is not being recognized. What we are witnessing is a process of mirroring and reflection of one's own self and of one's own »Eastern« position, when the recycling of different histories does not refer to Western but to Eastern positions and conditions. An alternative history of the East signifies a demand for the redefinition of this relation within contemporary constructions and relations of power.

Multiculturalism should be understood in its etymological meaning. In our case it refers to an insistence on the pluralism of differences and thus doesn't signify an unproblematic juxtaposition of cultures in a simple geographic sense. If we deal with cartography (and this is what this is all about) it is a political cartography and not one hidden behind a vague scientificity. What needs to be understood is the context, i.e., geography as the political *genius loci*. When speaking about differences we should speak about conditions, for although it may seem that productions are similar, we should be aware that the conditions are different and therefore their effects as well. We should ask ourselves which conditions enable us to speak about this discourse?

10. The syntagm was used by Homi Bhaba at the conference »The Expanded Internationalism« (Venice, 1990).

Changes and cultural traditions originating in Eastern Europe at the time of real socialism and before it (including cultural strategies and tactics as well as strategies and tactics of civil movements in these regions) should be taken into consideration when trying to define the new European culture.

It started with a self-organization of the excluded. In Slovenia for example, a few rare artists and art groups, the foremost among them being the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) network, consisting of the Laibach music group, IRWIN, the theater group The Sisters of Scipio Nasica (later named The Red Pilot), as well as a series of other groups have, with their projects, concerts, exhibitions, and performances found their place in the West. NSK which declares itself to be an abstract social body situated in real socio-political space represents simultaneously a Western and an Eastern phenomenon. The way it functions, its structure and organization resemble a capitalist demonic machine, a corporative system, which, nevertheless, cannot be found in the Western artworld, for there such an organization is possible only if linked to real financial capital. Thanks to its socialist heritage the NSK was able to appear on purely ideological foundations. The Slovenian alternative culture and subculture, with the emergence of the NSK and the new visual art and culture, which were, especially in the late seventies and in the eighties very political (video art, new political photography), are a good area for the conceptualization of the phenomenon of multiculturalism, and of border cultures.¹¹

Some of them are articulated in the »Moscow Declaration« which was written at the time of the »APT ART« and the »NSK Embassy« projects of the group IRWIN on 26 May 1992 in Moscow.¹² The »Moscow Declaration« points to

11. Cf. Aleš Erjavec & Marina Gržinič, *Ljubljana, Ljubljana (Slovenian Art and Culture of the Eighties)*, (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1991).

12. »The Moscow Declaration«:

1) We, the artists and critics from Ljubljana and Moscow who met in Moscow on 26 May 1992 on the occasion of the »APT ART« and IRWIN »NSK EMBASSY« projects, recognize the following facts:

A) The history, experience and time and space of Eastern countries of the twentieth century cannot be forgotten, hidden, rejected or suppressed.

B) The former East does not exist any more: new Eastern structure can only be made by reflecting on the past which has to be integrated in a mature way in the changed present and future.

C) This concrete history, this experience, and this time and space structured a specific subjectivity that we want to develop, form and reform; a subjectivity that reflects the past and the future.

D) This specific Eastern identity, its aesthetical and ethical attitude, are common to all of us and have a universal – not specifically Eastern – importance and meaning.

E) The condition of this common situation is not only individual but belongs to social,

the crucial issue of how to retain, in the present international constellation, specific cultural contexts and how to avoid standardization. In other words, how to present and interpret the specific identity of other cultures and productions without eliminating them with the one-sided and already formed view of the dominant culture.

The »APT ART« project which was started in the eighties in Moscow represents an attempt to search for political and personal/artistic genealogies which run parallel and are physically connected, but politically and culturally wide apart. The project »NSK Embassy« took place in the context of the internationalization of the »APT ART« project which was started and carried out by Moscow artists and art critics Lena Kurliantseva, Victor Misiano and Konstantin Zvezdochiotov. APT ART literally means »apartment art« and is an attempt to revive the habit of holding avant-garde exhibitions in private apartments in Moscow. It enabled artists and avant-garde art before the period of Perestroika and Glasnost to survive. APT ART which emerged at the time of Brezhnev represented also an ironic paraphrase of the American POP ART movement. The private apartment thus became a cultural space as the center of spiritual communication.¹³ APT ART INTERNATIONAL which follows in the nineties meant an artistic internationalization of the project, as the Russian artists put it, a big kitchen table, surrounded by art works, brings together the private and the public – now the international public.

In the context of the APT ART INTERNATIONAL project the group of painters IRWIN established an Embassy - the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) EMBASSY in Moscow as a social installation. In a private apartment on the

political and cultural experience, to the identity and physiognomy of Europe as a whole.

F) The experience of oppressive regimes (totalitarian, authoritarian) is common to more than half of the world population and can be found in a more or less developed state all over the globe. This is a universal experience.

G) This context and developed subjectivity are the real base of our new identity which takes a clear shape (also in the form of new social, political and cultural infrastructure) especially in the last decades of this century.

2) This text should have the following practical goals:

a) To articulate the basis of this new consciousness which is in the process of formation and reflection.

b) To implement and materialize the presented ideas in reality through a formation of new infrastructures, a two-way communication and a new repository of information.

c) To appeal to everyone who accepts the principles of this declaration.

– Josif Bakstein, Eda Čufer, Marina Gržinić, Olga Holmogorovna, IRWIN, Elena Kurliantseva, Georgy Liticevsky, Victor Misiano, Dimitri Prigow, Konstantin Zvezdochiotov

13. A similar event occurred in Ljubljana in 1985, for the IRWIN group (having at that time no links whatsoever with the Moscow artists) held its first exhibition also in a private apartment.



The "Moscow Declaration" meeting of artists and critics from Ljubljana and Moscow on 26 May 1992 in Moscow



Neue Slowenische kunst (NSK) Embassy in Moscow as a Social Instalation; private apartment, Moscow, June 1992



NSK Embassy in Moscow - the group IRWIN exhibited paintings from their "Capital" series; private apartment, Moscow, June 1992

Lenin Prospect No. 12, apt. 24, in the center of Moscow, in May and June 1992 the group IRWIN exhibited paintings from their »Capital« series. Posters, design work, video works and theater play by the Noordnung Cabinet (a group emerging from the Red Pilot group) were also presented.

The numerous discussions, taking place at the time of the Moscow project, showed that communist totalitarianism, in Russia as its epicenter, destroyed all possibility for other discourses to emerge. In this respect Slovenia was a very different story, for it was on the margins, in the periphery of this exclusive totalitarianism. Its specific position enabled it to preserve a relative freedom and a coexistence of different political and artistic discourses. True, Yugoslavia as a whole was a different case from other East European countries at least since Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, but in the eighties and even the late seventies the situation in its other parts was, although more tolerant than in countries of »real socialism«, still less tolerant than in the Slovenia or in the Yugoslavia of the sixties.

Such art was able to emerge exactly because it was completely absent in the past. The »other« is here inscribed in a certain »passage«, which now refers to an image, memory, history and cliché. These concepts function as the »institution of different cultural and artistic projects and histories into the visible«. ¹⁴ To make seen what was thus far hidden to the eyes. We deal here with repetition – to gain memory.

APT ART INTERNATIONAL is an occasion to ask ourselves with the artists of the Russian sots-art how to retain the monuments of the socialist realism from destruction without being accused of preserving the totalitarian tradition. Change Moscow into a phantasmagorical garden of post-totalitarian art? ¹⁵

With its projects, documentary material, and testimonies, the APT ART project attempted to point to a new cultural context and bring about a faster disintegration of obsolete ethical and aesthetical standards for understanding culture and one's own identity.

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With the demise of socialism and communism and in spite of the integrational processes in Europe, this continent is more divided than it was for a long time. The media might be opening up, but spiritually the continent is closing. Non-European cultures are finding this out and so is the European East. The East remains the East: in the time of multinational-national capital and postmodernity we witness the most primitive and horrible conflicts and human tragedies.

14. See Jo Anna Isaak, »Mapping the Imaginary«, *The Event Horizon*, edited by Lorne Falk & Barbara Fischer, (Banff: The Coach House Press & Walter Phillips Gallery, 1987).

15. See a project by Komar & Melamid in *Artforum*, May 1992.

»We live in the present, which is being constantly spilled into the past and this past is our future«, sings the Laibach group.

At the same time we should not accept this self-destructing position and in our attempt to find an equilibrium with the West burn our heretics and their books. The simplified version of equilibrium between the East and the West, which sought an identification of the East with the West, is no longer possible. To persevere in the belief of equal opportunities is more than utopian, it is suicidal. The idea of »catching up« is an illusion if it refers to the present form of the West. What we shall probably encounter in the future will be a restructuring of the East and the West, with the former undergoing different and, especially, more profound changes than the latter. Whether this shall be changes similar to those in Hungary, Slovenia, or in the Czech republic, or closer to those witnessed today in parts of the former Yugoslavia or Soviet Union remains to be seen. We fear that the answer is »both«. Only in certain cases art similar to the one that we described above will persist or perhaps even flourish. Elsewhere the demise of socialism will also represent the extinguishing of former cultures in their positive and negative aspects. In this respect much of the former socialist East is becoming more and more similar to the third world South.