
Teaching post-socialism, twenty years on

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Abstract

This paper considers the challenges involved in teaching about post-socialist transformation twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and reports some innovative practices, including a fieldwork-based module for Year 3 undergraduates, in place at the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES), University of Birmingham.

The challenge

Nearly twenty years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall heralded the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union. Scholars of this phenomenon have recently been debating the utility of terms such as 'post-Soviet', 'post-socialist', 'transition' and 'transformation' in an era when, for much of the region in question, EU accession, the hydrocarbon boom and the era of former Russian President Vladimir Putin are arguably more salient issues. In undergraduate teaching, students' understanding of contemporary human geographies of this region need to be underpinned by a comprehension of the legacy of the Soviet or socialist era. Students need to understand the demographics, population distribution, regional economic development, geopolitics and cultural constructions of nationhood and identity. It is still necessary to convey to students the chill of the Cold War and the catastrophic implications of the collapse of communism for peoples' everyday lives. The challenge today is how to effectively achieve this, when the tenor of current news reports from the region suggests a "new Cold War". Media conveys the region, and Russia in particular, as possessed of an ominous strength; the polar opposite of its position in the early 1990s.

In 1998, Light & Phinnemore published a paper examining the challenges of teaching post-socialist 'transition' to undergraduate students. These pertained to students' lack of familiarity with and understanding of terminology describing the communist era ('central planning', 'command economy'), the aspirations of 'transition' ('market economy', 'pluralist democracy'), and the vocabulary of 'transition' itself ('privatisation', 'liberalisation',

'shock therapy'). A major contributing factor to the lack of understanding was student age, or rather youth. Students aged 18 in 1998 were only nine in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell, had minimal awareness of the magnitude of events, and therefore few opportunities to 'pick up the jargon'.

A further ten years later, this problem is both more acute and significantly different. 1998's first-year undergraduates may not have noticed the collapse of the Soviet Union at the time, but during their teenage years they would have seen news reports detailing the collapse of regional economies, currencies, living standards, and the end of the "Cold War". By contrast, not only do today's undergraduates have no living memory of the Soviet era, but they are also too young to remember "shock therapy", and the collapse of the 'other' superpower. Our current students' knowledge of Russia is shaped by media coverage of tennis professionals, supermodels, international organised crime, films such as 'Eastern Promise' and billionaire football club buyouts. The challenge of teaching post-socialist transformation today is not just the absence of what is now perceived to be 'historical' knowledge, but rather an appreciation that our students have a different geographical perception of Russia from that of their lecturers.

However, this is a particularly fascinating time to teach about this region, and there is considerable demand within the student body, as knowledge about Russia can be seen to be an advantage to employers. Russia's economic recovery on the back of high oil and gas prices, a strengthened presence on the international diplomatic and economic stage under former President Putin, media use of Cold War rhetoric to describe the murder of Alexandr Litvinenko, and the perceived threat from an 'unpredictable' Russia to Europe's gas supply, are amongst the recent events which can be used within the lecture theatre as examples within economic, political and cultural geography. Whereas students in the 1990s, children of the Cold War (myself included) were fascinated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, today's students are also captivated by Russia, but in a different way, and for different reasons.

Programme context

GEES, at Birmingham, is fortunate in having a history of teaching the geography of the former socialist region. Ever since the post-War Hayter commission demanded the strengthening of Russian Studies in the UK, Birmingham has been a centre of Russian and East European studies and research, incorporated into the teaching of Geography. As such GEES, at Birmingham, has a significant cluster of geographers of post-socialism, with associated linguistic expertise, research output and anecdotal knowledge of the region. This specialism has enabled us to offer the range of undergraduate modules set out in Table 1.

understandings of this region, and which take them 'into' the region both virtually and physically.

How do you know what you know?

Undergraduate students often need encouragement to critically engage with 'academic' sources – some are reluctant to question the assumptions embedded in research papers, and to critique the arguments made. More broadly, many need encouragement to challenge the sources of their own opinions and the assumptions they make about the world around them. In the Year 2 module, at Birmingham, 'Alternative Capitalisms', we unpack their assumptions about the post-socialist world by exposing our own. Lecturers examine the origins of their interest in the region by recalling major events which shaped their childhood

Table 1: GEES undergraduate modules in the geography of post-socialism

| Year 2 | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| <p>Alternative Capitalisms</p> <p>Focuses on contemporary issues of geographical significance to, or relating to, various 'non-core' (non-Western) parts of the world, including the post-socialist region.</p>  | | |
| Year 3 | | |
| Russia in the Modern World | After Communism: Social and Cultural Geographies of Transition | Post-Socialist Transformation: Moscow |

Year 3 of the Single Honours undergraduate programme in Geography consists of 120 credits, 40 of which come from a 10,000-word dissertation. The remaining 80 credits are made up of four 20-credit modules, chosen from a list of over 40, of which three are listed in Table 1. (Joint Honours students take 60 taught credits in Geography, choosing three 20-credit modules.) Since the choice of dissertation usually broadly follows the choice of Year 3 modules, many students graduate having specialised to a greater or lesser extent in the geography of post-socialism.

Addressing the challenge

The programme context detailed above, coupled with the cluster of researchers in this region at GEES, has enabled us to develop a range of teaching approaches which facilitate students' reflection on the sources of their own

memories (such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, Reagan-Gorbachev summits, Olympic boycotts). In some students' eyes this approach only serves to reinforce the impression that lecturers are odd and geeky in having been this interested in the Cold War as teenagers, (a fact which is played upon ironically). For others, it is effective in revealing the ways in which knowledge is generated, and the relationship between an individual and their research. These sessions are followed by student-centred activities in which groups are set tasks to find sources of information about Russia beyond academic texts. They consider;

- film depictions of Russia and Russians (such as the James Bond series and 'Eastern Promises')
- television, print and online media reporting of news stories involving Russia (for example the murder of Alexandr Litvinenko, oil and gas supply, football club buyouts, and the Russian Presidential election of 2008)

- the advertisement of products originating in Russia, such as 'Baltika' beer and 'Russian Standard' vodka
- 'themed' venues such as 'Revolutions' bar, with a branch in Birmingham city centre

In each case, they examine the ways in which the cultural construction of these phenomena reject, reflect or reproduce some of the 'Cold War' rhetoric and propaganda lecturers had previously described. The large class size (120) prevents sharing of knowledge through a series of presentations, but an informal seminar discussion session held in place of a conventional lecture enables students to share their knowledge and reflect informally on their pre-suppositions and perceptions of Russia and the post-socialist region, while quizzing lecturers about their own memories.

Student feedback consistently valued "The personal perspectives given by lecturers growing up during the Cold War", and "Lecturers' personal stories; their cultural/personal views of the Cold War", as well as the skills they had developed, "reasoning skills – looking at different perspectives and questioning what to believe", "discussion skills – learning how to contribute in discussions", "thinking more critically about how countries are portrayed", and "analysing how our own opinions are formed"

"Seeing" the field

Fieldwork is a longstanding pedagogical characteristic of geography (Sauer 1956, Stoddart 1986, Gerber & Goh 2000). More recently, it has become a defining characteristic through which geography argues for its academic distinctiveness (Pawson & Teather 2002), and the requirement for a fieldwork component of most undergraduate Geography programmes emphasises the importance of 'being there' and 'seeing it for yourself'. Although independent travel to Eastern Europe has become much simpler since EU accession, Russia remains largely 'off the beaten track', and teaching about Russia requires resourcefulness in conveying the sense of a place most students have never seen for themselves.

Here, the link between teaching and research is critical, not so much in entering the debate over whether an excellent researcher necessarily makes an excellent teacher (QAA 2000, Lee 2004, Healey 2005), but in the spin-off effects that researchers who teach can have on teaching content. Experience at GEES shows that students particularly value the 'anecdotal' material that appears, in lectures and which sometimes draws upon experiences which took place during research. 'Fleshing out' the academic in this way, by explaining some of the context and circumstances of research, enables

students to engage more critically with academic sources, and to appreciate the difficulties and challenges of carrying out research in this region. In module evaluation for "After Communism", student comments demonstrated the value of being taught by 'someone who has been there', and hearing 'the inside story' behind research outputs.

While the passage of time since 1989 has its disadvantages for teaching post-socialist transformation, one distinct advantage is the increased availability of audio-visual materials and online sources to supplement lecture teaching. Many of these are produced by students themselves, such as at the New York University Department of Journalism (<http://journalism.nyu.edu>), by professional journalists via Frontline World (<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/>), or as add-ons to well-known news websites such as BBC online. In each case DVD or streaming film can be used to provide visual context for lecture material to reinforce or question arguments advanced by 'academic' sources, or to present materials to be deconstructed and unpacked for their political context, 'hidden' messages or simply for what is left unsaid. While travel to Russia remains logistically challenging and expensive, there is much which can be done via online sources.

'Being there' – taking students into the field

An advantage of the critical mass of post-socialist specialists at GEES is the existence of the local contacts in the region necessary for the establishment of a field course to Russia. Light & Phinnemore's experience of taking students to Romania in the 1990s demonstrated the difficulty of running such a fieldcourse, the importance of planning, flexibility, and tenacity on the part of the organisers, and the level of reliance on local contacts. In the 2007/8 academic year, by establishing "Post-Socialist Transformation: Moscow", a fieldcourse module based on fieldwork in Russia, we established a means to take students into the field and to show them the subjective and partial context in which knowledge about the post-socialist world is produced, in order that they could critically engage more effectively with academic research outputs.

The module was challenging to organise and to operate; travel to Russia requires visas and assembling the required documentation for two dozen students was a protracted process. Moscow is an expensive city both to travel to and to stay in; the lack of budget flights from the UK and the cost of accommodation meant that advance planning and the asking of favours from Moscow colleagues was necessary. Security concerns were paramount, and taking place at a time of heightened tension

between the UK and Russia, the field trip itself was potentially a risky endeavour. However, students engaged fully with the process, using visual sources such as election campaign billboards as triggers for debates over geopolitics, learning enough basic Russian to navigate the city and actively reflecting on both their own preconceptions about Russia and the cultural construction of 'the West'.

Taking students to Moscow was a means to provide a counter to the media depictions of Russia which shaped the perceptions of Year 2 undergraduates. Exposed to the vast and evident income polarities in the city, the legacy of the Soviet period and the transformation from communism took on renewed importance, and provided context both to the 'book-learned' geographies of post-socialism, but also to the production of academic knowledge about Russia (see Moran & Round, forthcoming).

The Moscow fieldcourse module was extremely challenging to develop and operate, but in terms of its outputs, both for students and staff, it was extremely rewarding.

Summary

This paper set out to consider the challenges of teaching post-socialism 'twenty years on' from the fall of the Soviet bloc. While challenges certainly exist, there are also several distinct advantages of the passage of time. Firstly, recent events have made Russia a fascinating place once again and students are keen to learn about it. Secondly, the availability of materials which bring 'the field' into the classroom has made the teaching of this region a richer and more nuanced experience for students. Finally, the opportunity of taking students into the field, where the necessary linguistic and logistical resources exist, rounds out the process. In the case of GEES, at Birmingham, the visits have stimulated many of the fieldcourse students to continue postgraduate study of this region, within the discipline of Geography and beyond.

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