

Panel: The Problem of / with Socialist Democracy in Eastern Europe

“The history of socialism has been the history of the problem of democracy” (Sirianni 1982). Thirty-five years since the end of state socialism in Eastern Europe, this insight has either been reformulated – and resignified – as “the problem of the lack of democracy,” or altogether lost. For state socialist regimes from 1917 to 1989/91, however, socialist democracy was central not just to attempts of self-legitimation, by way of arguing that compared to democracy under capitalism, socialist democracy was practiced in the context of collectively owned means of production, access to mass education, etc.; but socialist democracy was also a preoccupation of intellectual and expert discourse, institutional construction, and political practice in different set-ups (on the factory shopfloor, within institutions, at the local level of administration, etc.). As late socialist regimes faced multiple crises, investment in socialist democracy continued in institutional, grassroots, as well as oppositional ways. Scholarship has mostly looked at the late socialist period for the rise of “civil society,” a precursor to post-1989 liberal democracy, which came out as the clear winner of transition, while socialist democracy came to be understood as merely a façade put up by totalitarian regimes. Our panel aims to challenge this greatly simplified interpretation of late socialist Eastern Europe by recovering the history of socialist democracy as a problem that elicited continued theorizing, institutional-building, and political practice, and not as an already-settled affair.

Presentations can address topics such as:

- changing ideological discourses on socialist democracy in relation to crisis
- theoretical underpinnings of socialist democracy (hermeneutical discussions, debates, original theorizing)
- the institutional framework of socialist democracy (mass and civil organizations, workers’ councils, jury councils, local and regional assemblies, etc.)
- socialist democracy in the working place
- cultural, economic, and political participation and socialist democracy
- socialist democracy and the issues of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race
- varieties of socialist democracy (e.g., self-governing, self-management)
- the legacy of socialist democracy and new forms

If you would like to propose a paper within this panel, please write to Una Blagojević (blagojevic_una@phd.ceu.edu) or Adela Hîncu (adela.hincu@gmail.com) by April 28.

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