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Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 14:15 Aleksanteri Institute, Unioninkatu 33, Meeting room 2nd floor
Dr. Maya Nadkarni

In Hungary's State of "Not Normal": Rhetorics of Crisis, Transparency, and the "Dishonest Mess" of Postsocialism

ABSTRACT:

Over the past five years, a rhetoric of crisis has pervaded both public culture and everyday speech in Hungary. A result of both economic problems and political battles, this perception of national crisis has thrown into doubt the very success of the transition from state socialism two decades ago. Indeed, such insistence on the failure of postsocialism—and the necessity of drastic action to restore Hungary to a desired state of “normalcy”—has increasingly been phrased as a crisis of postsocialist subjectivity itself: the perceived failure to attain the individual and institutional transformations in morality, transparency, and public civility that were also promised by the change in system.

Based upon interviews, participant observation, and media analysis, my paper investigates how the perception of living in crisis has fueled a self-reflexive cultural anxiety in which the very experience of the everyday is now narrated as pathological and exceptional. That is, rather than take claims to “crisis” at face value, I examine what the perception of crisis reveals about structure of expectations vis-à-vis politics, European integration, and postsocialist transformation in Hungary. To do so, I examine what has been fantasized as the alternative to crisis: a “normal” [normális] life that the disappointments of postsocialism have made difficult to attain.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Maya Nadkarni received her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology at Columbia University and is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Swarthmore College. Her research focuses upon memory of the socialist past and the challenges of national subjectivity under postsocialism. She has published articles on socialist nostalgia, Budapest's Statue Park Museum of communist monuments, and spectacles of criminal and celebrity culture in postsocialist Hungary, and she is also completing a book manuscript titled “Remains of Socialism: Memory, nation, and the afterlives of state socialism in Hungary”. At the Aleksanteri Institute, she plans to complete two articles from her current research project on rhetorics of crisis and cultural anxiety in contemporary Hungary.

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