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Learning from the 'Alien': How the Study of Transitional Central and Eastern Europe Helps Illuminate Governance in the United States Today

Studying Central and Eastern Europe – and observing how communism really worked and then came undone – has proved an ideal training ground for examining governing, power, and influence in the United States at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In trying to make sense of these arenas in my home country, I have found my experience in the former Eastern Bloc and the work of scholars from the region to be invaluable in three key ways.

The first is in analyzing the system. As experience has shown, when a centrally planned state that had owned virtually all the property, companies, and wealth breaks down (and no authoritarian stand-in is put in its place), a network–based mode of governing and business arises to loosely replace it. The state-private nexus becomes the epicenter of governance and policy activity. Governance and policy making in the United States today are not altogether dissimilar: There a new era of blurred boundaries is marked by a great upsurge in contracting out of crucial federal government functions and a proliferation of quasi-government organizations and advisory boards, among other developments, and a resulting fusion (and confusion) of state and private power. Not only do a host of nongovernmental players do the government's work, often overshadowing government bureaucracy. New institutional forms of governing join the state and the private, permeating virtually all arenas of government. The economic arena now vies for the 'excellence in blurring' prize with intelligence, military, and 'homeland security' enterprises, where so much action has taken place since 9/11**.**

The second way in which research in transitional Central and Eastern Europe is instructive for dissecting governing, power, and influence in the United States is in the ethnographic focus on the players and networks that operate at the state-private nexus, influencing governing and policy decisions. When command systems unraveled and informal maneuvering was given free reign, self-enfranchising networks and groups, schooled in circumventing bureaucracy, mobilized themselves. They worked the state-private nexus to secure the resources and privileges necessary to further their own goals, whatever they might be. These networks and groups have been variously described as 'institutional nomads,' 'restructuring networks,' 'unruly coalitions,' and 'clans' by Polish, Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian, and American ethnographers and analysts. My observation of institutional nomadic groups and clans has helped me theorize about 'flex nets'—a new breed of influencers I have identified in the United States and globally. For instance, the flex net that I call the Neocon core, a tight-knit dozen or so players who have been working together for thirty years to remake American foreign policy according to their own vision, helped take the United Stated to war in Iraq through coordinated efforts via their state-private network. Likewise, the financial crisis intensified the interdependency of state and private power, as financial and political policy deciders 'coincided' at the highest echelons of power. Like nomadic groups and clans, flex nets operate at the interstices of official and private power, help organize the relationship between them, and thereby forge new forms of power and influence.

Finally, ethnographic research in transitional Central and Eastern Europe has provided a basis for reexamining conventional categories and models that guide so much thinking about politics and society. For instance, because ethnographers saw that institutional nomadic groups and clans could not be reduced to 'lobbyists' or 'interest groups,' they invented their own terms and theories much more suited to analyzing the societies under study. Moreover, by focusing on players and their networks as drivers of governing and policy making, ethnographers laid the groundwork for badly needed critiques of social science categories such as 'state' versus 'private,' 'bureaucracy' versus 'market,' and 'centralized' versus 'decentralized.' These categories often obfuscate, rather than illuminate, the influence of the players. All this is just as true in the United States, and scholars there would do well to learn from this experience. For example, the Neocon core owes its influence at least in part to the ability of its members to test the rules both of the state (those of accountability) and of the private sector (those of competition) and to blur boundaries between bureaucratic and market practices. In short, the kind of ethnographic and anthropological analysis that enabled scholars to deal with the complexity, ambiguity, and messiness of political, policy, and social processes in transitional Central and Eastern Europe is uniquely suited to examine the interactions between public policy and private interests and the mixing of state, nongovernmental, and business forms that are increasingly prevalent in the United States – and around the world.