

Rethinking Ethnography in Central Europe

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The anthology *Rethinking Ethnography in Central Europe* contains eleven essays reporting on contemporary ethnographic/anthropological research projects. Their authors are fourteen well-qualified scholars working in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Serbia. Subjects are quite diverse, but unified by common aims and framed by general overviews in the editors' introduction and afterword. The essays provide specific information on culture, attitudes, and everyday life, both individual and communal, in contemporary Central Europe. Nearly all of the subjects involve relationships with other nations to some degree. The volume provides a traditional scholarly apparatus in the form of numerous footnotes, lengthy bibliographies, and cogent explanations of research theories and methods.

The introduction traces the history of changing meanings of the term "Central Europe." Introductory comments are also made on developments in ethno- and cultural anthropology in these post-socialist countries. Some Western scholars – aware of Stalinist political coercion in 1949-1953 and Soviet condemnation of the internationally known Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski – have exaggerated the enduring influence of Marxism in scholarship in these countries. Other persistent biases are assumptions about the superiority of Western culture and its association with progress and modernization, and discounting of locally produced knowledge, sometimes assuming that it is based more on nostalgia and romanticism than scholarly method.

Countering these negative assumptions, the editors state that anthropological research in Central Europe has progressed using sound scholarship based on "multiple theories" for decades. To be sure, the articles contain some evidence-based mentions of enduring legacies of the real-socialist past. Interactions with the influences and ideologies of Western Europe are frequently mentioned, but they are complex. The West is not a simple chiffre of progress and modernization. An article on Polish women giving birth in Germany, for example, shows differences in insurance, rights of non-citizens, agency of patients, birthing environments and policies, as well as individual preferences of patients. Rather than showing that Germany is "advanced" and Poland "backward," the article presents a complex mosaic of contrasts.

Several studies address narrowly focused subjects may to reflect everyday life, but are intriguing. We learn, for example, of effects of a new highway on gnomonic lawn ornament businesses and Swedish expectations of

proper dress for Polish female physicians. Other probably unexpected subjects are patriarchal and homophobic aspects of sex therapists' training in Poland and the Dalai Lama's status as a cult figure in the Czech Republic.

One article presents research on a system of Vietnamese bazaars and marketplaces throughout Central Europe. The merchants involved owe their long-term success to mobility, adaptability, and the continuity of their socialist-era ties. Also influenced by "international linkages from the socialist past" (p. 75) is a family business featured in another article. The firm produces iodized water, a radiation prevention tonic, in the Czech Republic and marketed in Chernobyl.

New Urban Activism in Slovakia: The Case of Banská Bystrica tells us that urban activism in medium-sized cities such as Banská Bystrica, with a population of about 80,000, has been neglected in recent research. In her article, Aleksandra Bitušíková states that she "challenge[s] some previous theoretical discourses and empirical research carried out by Western scholars that described civil society in Central and Eastern Europe as weak and undeveloped" (p. 116). The author presents evidence of formal and informal civil activism under state socialism in the city as well as recently. Furthermore, she describes the city's participatory budget program and efforts of various organizations, as well as political, environmental, and artistic movements in the city. One example is "Not in Our Town," an international grassroots movement created to promote inclusion and stop hate and bullying. The rather low number of involved citizens is partly due to lingering caution and apathy fostered by socialism. Therefore, qualitative as well as quantitative assessment is needed to demonstrate the growing strength of civil society and activism.

Rural life is explored in *Ethnography of Post-Socialist Rural Change*, a study of rural areas in the Czech Republic that have bolstered their economy by promoted tourism. Using a variety of interviews and conversations, the research is based on "intimate long-term engagement with people's everyday worlds" (p. 198). Some interviewees were involved in, and enthusiastic about, tourism, while others found it disruptive to the community, environment, and tranquility. Residents feeling nostalgia for socialism, view contemporary society as too "business-like, individualized, universalist, and cosmopolitan" (p. 204). Villagers reported less economic hardship under socialism than urban dwellers.

Again and again, the articles assembled in this volume challenge common assumptions and theories: *Othering the Self* discusses lives of migrants following Poland's accession to the European Union. They display varying personal, class, and national identities, and both "sedentrist" and "nomadic" perspectives. With regards to that, the article warns against simplistic use of ideological labels. A key insight emerges: "Individuals experience multiple ideologies and [...] select various elements from [them], such as nationalism, cosmopolitanism, or neoliberal capitalism, with its emphasis on individualism and flexibility" (p. 34). Likewise, *Civil Society and EU Integration of Serbia* by Marek Mikuš asserts that research on the enlargement of the European Union has focused too much on identification and belonging, "treating these as if they existed in isolation from power relationships and systems of domination" (p. 147).

In addition to theories, this book informs us about anthropological methods. Several pieces enhance general findings with accounts of pertinent individual case studies. In his article, Mikuš identifies his fieldwork as

"multisited ethnography." Methods employed included "participant observation, discourse analysis, analysis of secondary sources, and interviewing" and the study of "practices, interpretations, biographies, interactions, and relationships of individual actors" in the context of "institutional [...] structures" and "ideological and cultural narratives" (p. 150). The articles assembled here are all based on similar methods. Of course, intelligent analysis must be applied to findings yielded by this research the ability to look at the material in new ways and question widely-believed assumptions in everyday life and in scholarly discourse.

Like many anthologies, this volume explores diverse subjects, rather than offering one comprehensive and unified text. As a whole, however, it offers its readers rich, overlapping experiences in two dynamic and colorful worlds. One world is contemporary Central Europe, viewed from theoretical and everyday perspectives, and, as relevant, in historical and international contexts. The other realm is that of current ethno-anthropological research. Both vibrant worlds are skillfully portrayed as diverse and full of contrasts and tensions, achievements and challenges.



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