

BOOK REVIEW

BEING GÓRAL: IDENTITY POLITICS AND GLOBALIZATION IN POSTSOCIALIST POLAND

Deborah Cahalen Schneider (2006) State University of New York Press

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In this concise but fine-grained and carefully researched study of a regional identity movement in Poland, Deborah Calahan Schneider presents a small-scale ethnographic analysis that will, undoubtedly, not only interest anthropologists working in Poland but also general readers who seek to gain a better understanding of more large-scale societal processes in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. Starting with a description of the visit of Pope John Paul II to the town of Żywiec in 1995—a place in Poland that is the home of one of the country's largest beer breweries and known to be the heartland of Góral identity—Schneider tells the story of why, how, and in what circumstances specific population groups in Żywiec have come to identify themselves publicly with “Góralness” and have been active in promoting it as a label of ethnic identification. By using as the point of departure the figure of the Pope, a public figure who has been claimed to be a Góral by the townspeople of Żywiec but has simultaneously been seen by many Poles as a powerful symbol for the Polish nation as a whole, Schneider uncovers a complex political game of regional identity formation and capitalist transformation. Instead of taking the existence of a unified Góral movement for granted, Schneider opens the black box of local identity politics and finds that there is more going on than one would be inclined to think at first sight. During extensive fieldwork in the Żywiec community carried out in the middle of the 1990s, Schneider discovers that Góral identity is not equally important to everyone who is said to belong to the community. The idiom of Góral identity, as it turns out, is not spontaneously used by the average inhabitant of Żywiec, and it is hard to pin down the markers that members of the community consider as the objective basis of that identity.

Schneider claims that underlying various identity claims one can find another layer of social relations, one that is fundamental in determining the identity dynamics in the

community; these are the social relations of economic transition. Schneider hypothesizes the existence of a “class conflict” between, on the one hand, those elite groups who seek to attract foreign investors and, on the other hand, those who favor a more insular and region-oriented economic strategy. Both elite groups invoke images of traditional Góral identity to buttress their public action, but they do so in different ways and with different agendas in mind. Schneider's main point is that we can better understand the reasons why various actors seek to entrench a traditional regional identity by seeing their actions as a response to outside forces of economic transition.

This way of seeing things indeed illuminates a number of developments in Żywiec as well as in Central and Eastern Europe more generally. While a stereotypical way of explaining the emergence of ethnic identity in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 is to argue that it is the result of ethnic affiliations that have always existed but were earlier suppressed by the presence of socialism, a more sophisticated interpretation is indeed one that considers it to be the result of contemporary social processes in the field of political economy. In Poland, the economic transition of the 1990s distributed wealth unevenly. While some urban centers could attract capital, more peripheral areas, such as Żywiec, did not get what they expected. According to Schneider, this uneven economic transition has made many Poles in provincial communities feel “abandoned or betrayed by the national government and new economy that had given them such high hopes in 1989” (p.6-7). One of the responses of local elites to this situation was a deliberate attempt to promote an idiom of local identity in order to (re-)gain political and economic authority.

Thus, besides being an intriguing thematically organized history of the town of Żywiec, this elegant book is a useful contribution to the wider literature on identity politics in Central Europe, not only because it offers a view

into a relatively unknown case, but also because it shows that group identity is not simply a matter of “being,” that it is not simply the result of the prior existence of ethnic differentiation, but the result of the actions of contemporary economic elites deliberately promoting ethnic identity as a dominant political idiom. For this reason, the title of the book might seem somewhat misleading. This book is ultimately not about “being Góral,” but about the social processes that lead to “becoming Góral.” In Żywiec, Góral identity is used as a kind of currency to trade on issues that are in the end not so much about that identity itself. In the same vein, one can argue that this book covers more than the subtitle suggests. By examining not only the postcommunist period, but also the period of the Austro-Hungarian partitions, the interwar Polish state, the Nazi occupation and the

communist period, Schneider finds that such processes of identity politics as a response to outside forces also occurred before 1989.

Of course, the story of the Góral takes place in a very unique setting, so one should therefore be careful with generalizing from this one case. Nevertheless, Schneider’s conclusion that class relations shape local identity politics is a plausible argument, and one that perhaps could help to shed some light on the puzzle of national Polish politics today—in a country that has successfully applied for its “return to Europe,” we find in 2006 a governing coalition that seeks to abandon the language of capitalist transition, is openly skeptic of the European Union, and builds its support on a defensive language of national identity.

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