

Book Review: Chris Hann's *The Skeleton at the Feast: Contributions to Eastern European Ethnography*.

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Hann, Chris, 1995, *The Skeleton at the Feast: Contributions to Eastern European Ethnography*. Canterbury, UK: University of Kent at Canterbury. Center for Social Anthropology and Computing Monographs 9. 265pp. \$15.

If Chris Hann's monograph, *The Skeleton at the Feast: Contributions to Eastern European Ethnography* was to be marketed by a record label, it would fall into the "B-sides and out-takes" genre, an LP crammed with experimental pieces of abandoned projects, underplayed nuggets, and alternative versions of hit songs. Record collectors delight in the unusual, if sometimes patchy, offering because the compilation provides a look at their favorite artist at work and because it brings to light works that have less commercial appeal. Likewise, scholars of Eastern Europe will delight in Hann's monograph's idiosyncratic essays on his better-known ethnographies in Polish and Hungarian villages, his reflections on fieldwork in Eastern Europe and the rise of "transitology," and excerpts from a textbook project that was never completed.

In Part One, Hann presents five chapters that he had originally written for a textbook on Eastern European ethnography that was to be a collaborative project with Steven Sampson but was never published. These chapters discuss borders and histories, peasant ethnography, religion and ritual, ethnicity and nationalism, and kinship and

the family. The bibliographic materials alone are a valuable resource for scholars of Eastern Europe. Hann provides an overview of ethnographic literature in English on Eastern Europe, and also includes works by ethnographers and historians writing in Polish, Russian, Czech, and Hungarian, although some well-known ethnographers, such as Tamas Hofer, are given a more cursory treatment.

Highlights of Part One include the chapter on boundaries and histories, which covers the relationships between "European-ness," "Eastern-ness," and political economy from the Middle Ages through the present transformation from state socialism. The chapter on religion and ritual treats both the secular rituals of state socialism and the relationship between religious groups and the state, investigating the

Greek Catholic, or Uniate, Church at length. One of the oldest of anthropology's fields of study, kinship, gets a fresh spin as Hann details the ways in which ethnographers of Eastern Europe have traced the changing roles of women and household units since the advent of state socialism. Although the sections on peasants and nationalism and ethnicity are well-written and reasonably thorough as entries in a textbook, these areas of the anthropology of Eastern Europe are better fleshed-out in other works, including Hann's ethnographies.

In Part Two, Hann presents three essays based on his ethnographic research on Hungary's Great Plain and in a southeastern Polish village, and four essays which touch upon themes of self-reflexivity, the emerging discipline of "transitology," privatization, and

Orientalism. Originally published in Hungarian journals or presented at various conferences in Eastern Europe, these essays strive for a more complex picture of the transformation from state socialism and suggest that ethnography as an alternative to the more triumphalist accounts provided by economists and political scientists within and outside of the region. Rather than merely rehashing Hann's ethnographies, the three ethnographic essays take experimental approaches to familiar issues: a rural community on the Hungarian

Great Plain is treated as an example of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, Polish Solidarity is viewed from the peasant perspective, and ethnic consciousness in Lemkovina meets Soviet ethnos theory. Perhaps the most thought-provoking are the chapters on privatization in Hungary, new forms of Orientalism on the Turkish-former Soviet border, and the emerging specialization of "transitology."

Chapter Nine, "A Critique of Anthropological Self-Contemplation," intended as a polemic against "navel-gazing," unintentionally makes a rather persuasive case for more self-reflexive ethnographies. Although Hann argues that the persuasive and scientific properties of ethnography are not enhanced by self-reflexivity, he portrays moments of

confusion and disgust when confronted with alcoholism and wife-beating over the course of his research. Hann did not include these instances in his ethnographies, sensing that to do so to pander to readers' baser, sensationalistic instincts. Yet Hann's discretion in this matter surprised me: in a book that celebrated the particular attention paid to women's roles in the family system in recent ethnographies, I would have expected Hann to give more serious consideration to the very real problems, which he encountered first-hand, of Hungarian and Polish women.

Overall, *The Skeleton at the Feast* offers readers a rewarding collection of essays. Part One is a pleasure to read and would serve marvelously as a textbook for a course on the ethnography of Eastern Europe. Part Two makes a persuasive case for the enduring importance of ethnography in analyzing the cultures of state socialism and postsocialism. Like a "B-sides and outtakes" LP, *The Skeleton at the Feast* is full of surprises which reward any reader who unearths it from the "rare import" bin at the store.