

Book Review: *The Private Poland: An anthropologist's look at Everyday Life*, by Janine Wedel. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986. 232 pp., 19 photographs, index, 1 bibliography. \$17.95 (hardcover).

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This is a popularized version of the author's recently completed Berkeley dissertation. It greatly resembles the better exposes of Soviet life like Willis' *Klass* or Shipler's *Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* though without the emphasis on political elites. The focus of the book is the gap between public life and private strategies of personal and household exchanges. The dual worlds of public and private are manipulated in order for Poles to procure basic necessities, to resolve conflicts with the bureaucracy, to obtain information, and to find their way from one social circle to another. The book is well written, with many vivid examples of the second economy, family and friendship ties, how Poles adjust to the humiliation inflicted upon them by the bureaucracy, and the complicated situation of the "opposition" in the post-Martial Law period. For East Europeanist anthropology, which (Simic's studies excepted) has focused almost exclusively on rural life, this study of urban social exchange and the private worlds of Warsaw intellectuals is a refreshing change.

From the strictly anthropological point of view, however, *The Private Poland* has major flaws. First, it is devoid of any anthropological theorizing. "Exchange" and "social networks" appear as givens. The private/public dichotomy is presented as a historical continuity. Ideas of "pride", "dignity" and "shame" are presented as uniquely Polish.

Second, apart from a few words about the second economy in the very last pages of the book, there are no intra-East European comparisons. Not a single reference is made to any anthropological work on Eastern Europe. Such comparisons would have helped because so many of the features Wedel describes for Poland appear in other East European societies, e.g., the history of subjugation by foreign powers, the infatuation with the West, the cultivated, intellectual life (*duchowe*), the public/private distinction, suspiciousness of bureaucracy, cultivation of social networks and exchange relations, the second economy, informal information

transmission, and the co-existence of pervasive scarcity with the idea that all things are possible if one knows the right people. If these features exist due to the nature of "real socialism", Wedel might want to tell us why; yet she traces these traits back to specific factors in Poland's history, including the Nazi occupation.

The other reason some remarks on Poland vis-a-vis the other East European states would be warranted would be to set off Poland as the very special case that it is: there is an organized opposition, a relatively free cultural life, an alternative institutional umbrella in the Church, a private peasantry (which Wedel does not deal with), and constant connection with the West via dollars, relatives and tourist/ work visits. By East European standards, Poland is a free country. Moreover, the private/public distinction comes into difficulties in view of the fact that Poland's opposition and Solidarnosc were of a very public character. In no other East European country has the private/public distinction been breached so effectively as in Poland. Without any comparison we cannot understand why public life in Poland (even in its oppositional form) has been so vibrant.

The third flaw in the book is that the anthropologist has gone native to such an extent that she misses some of the obvious similarities between Poland and life in the West. For example, among those American groups who are economically deprived, politically oppressed or humiliated by the bureaucracy ("humiliation" is a key theme in Polish culture. their reaction is a very typical Polish behavioral pattern of underground economy, back-door maneuvering, and reliance on family and kin networks (cf. Carol Stack, Eliot Liebow). Moreover, like the Poles, American parents DO in fact help out their kids economically; and Polish academics are not the only academics who respond to a bad or naive lecture by an outsider with polite silence. The book's bibliography consists of references cited, largely in Polish. Some key English-language sources which really could have been of assistance include C. Milosz's *Captive Mind*, the Polish DiP Report *State of the Republic* and the collection of articles in Volume III of *Sisyphus--Crisis and Conflict: Poland 1980-81*, in which many of the intellectuals she mentions have written excellent pieces in English on the social and moral consequences of the public/private distinction.

Yet as both a popular presentation and an anthropological study of Polish everyday life, Wedel's book is a long overdue contribution. Similar comparative studies should be carried out for other East European societies. Finally, the popular presentation and the flaws I have cited

make the book perfectly suited for teaching. Students could, for example, flesh out Wedel's study by comparing it with networks or rumors or the public/ private distinction in other East European states or their own hometown. Hopefully the price will come down so that students can buy it.