

More on Western Anthropologists in Eastern Europe

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Our ongoing discussion on the role of the Western anthropologist in Eastern Europe is continued with this open Letter -from Michael Sozan to Chris Hann on the subject of the Datter's article in last issue of the Newsletter. We hope that Hann -- and any others who feel the urge -- will respond in the next issue. Like all signed articles in the Newsletter, Sozan's comments do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.

Dear Chris Hann,

I wish to address only one of the topics raised in your letter (*Newsletter*, Volume 5, Number 1, Page 4). You write, "I would like Western readers to be able to form some idea from my work of the 'legitimacy' of the authorities, at various levels, in the eyes of the people I write about....[O]n the basis of some slight first-hand acquaintance with all of them, that legitimacy varies greatlyI would argue against the kind of cultural relativism that, in the case of Eastern Europe, would require us to take this political context as a uniform constant."

First of all, the term 'legitimacy' troubles me the most. It is not used by American anthropologists, therefore it would have been helpful if you qualified it. Quotation marks furthermore seem to be confusing here. Whom are you quoting? The authorities, the people or yourself? Do you use them in jest, sarcastically, implying that the people in question have illegitimate rulers (whatever "illegitimate" may mean)? Or do you mean the opposite: political authority in Eastern Europe (would this include Yugoslavia? Watch out Halpern, Hammel and Lockwood) is always legitimate, and only some "western imperialist" (Alan Lomax's words) anthropologists would even deal with the idea of "legitimacy", and therefore you are quoting westerners.

I wish you had given us even a cursory definition of "legitimacy." A Hobbsean, Robesperean, Napoleonic, feudal, Nazi, Leninist or any definition would have been good for a departure. Do Baganda kings and Yanamamo headmen have legitimate power? If you mean Leninist legitimacy, then you should not put it in quotes. It is understood by all of us on this side of the Atlantic that the principle of Leninist legitimacy cannot vary in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Albania and Bulgaria. Although it is the "purest" in the Soviet

Union, it is omnescent in these countries. Empirically Leninist legitimacy has been well analyzed in your work, especially in *Tázlátr* and in *A Village Without Solidarity*. In these societies power is in the hands of the Communist Party and the Party is the people. Local autonomy, conflict resolution, individual power, voting, formal vs informal leadership are decadent, bourgeois topics, inappropriate where the people rule.

In socialist countries there is no need for local autonomy (another term shunned by anthropologists) or a government representing the population, because the Party does all those things which the people would want anyway. Since the ownership of the natural resources and the means of production have been removed from the hands of the class enemy, there is no need for some local "leaders" to go around "fighting" and struggling for power. The situation is different in capitalist societies, where powerful interest groups must be subdued by any means possible (and that includes parliamentary) Village India or South American peasant village political organizations are unique. They are probably "survivals" of ancient times.

No wonder American anthropologists have purposefully avoided Soviet-East European village politics. It isn't that we are unaware of the Western bourgeois challenge to the legitimacy of the Leninist notion of governing. We are indeed well aware of it. But this does not mean we are going to raise any little issue they (our opponents) consider important. We know very well that village governments and higher levels of government are legitimate in Eastern Europe. Variation, of course, is empirically observable, but that is always a function of individual personality.

I would welcome a debate on the question of political legitimacy in Eastern Europe -- on any level from local to national -- on the pages of our newsletter.

Another topic you mentioned was ethics, which, for East Europeanists is of vital importance -- perhaps more important than to specialists of other regions with peasant populations -- because of the suspicious governments we deal with. I am sure the Romanianists have a lot to say on this subject (i.e., how do we train graduate students for East European fieldwork?).

Hoping for a fruitful scholarly debate,

Sincerely yours,
Michael Sozan
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