

A Comment from Western Europe

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Whether it might indicate the maturation of the discipline or whether it is merely a product of the times that we are living in, anthropologists in many countries seem nowadays to pay much more attention to their role in the societies in which they do their research and also to their role in the countries in which they have their institutional bases (the problems multiplying, rather than diminishing, when the country is the same). Thus many in Great Britain would echo Sam Beck's call for a greater commitment to "public anthropology" (in Volume 4, Number 2 of the *Newsletter*); and GAPP (Group for Anthropology in Policy and Practice) has been organizing anthropologists for this purpose for several years now in Britain. There is no broad gap between such applied anthropologists and others who would insist on the unsullied purity of an academic discipline: employment opportunities are so scarce that, really, you need to be outstandingly lucky to pick up a job anywhere at all these days!

But if that sounds to me like one matter where the American situation may differ from the British, far more important from the point of view of this newsletter is the possible difference over the rendering of Eastern European societies and cultures to our respective anthropological and lay audiences. Reading the series of earlier contributions to the newsletter (by Cole, PiSunyer, Halpern, Kideckel and others) I am struck by the sharpness of the political consciousness behind each article. It has forced me to think more carefully than I had before about ethical issues and the crucial question pursued by Beck (perhaps first posed clearly by Sozan, *Current Anthropology* 20: 140-146) as to "Who is the research for and why are we doing it?"

I don't think there can be any easy answers to such questions and there is little in preceding articles with which I would disagree. It is flattering to read in Tamas Hofer's interview with Beck that a chapter of my doctoral thesis was made available in translation to policy-makers in Hungary; but, of course, it had no practical impact. I think we should always be trying to write in sympathy with the people we are writing about, and we should do the best we can to arrange translations, etc., to ensure that our accounts have some effect in practice. The problem is perhaps more complicated when one turns to consider the society one is writing for "at home", given present global political divisions. Here I would only comment that it is perhaps easier to

write about socialist societies if you do not belong to the non-socialist superpower. The reason why the ethical problems discussed by others have not bothered me unduly is that I have never felt any political constraints on my research. My grants came through official exchange programs or from the British Research Council. I never felt in the least compromised by that, or by any contacts made in East European countries (though it is true that I was fortunate to work in the two countries, Hungary and Poland, which of the entire Soviet bloc have pursued the most "liberal" policies towards fieldworking anthropologists).

On reflection I think there is nonetheless a clear ethical position that I would wish to defend, and it implies a clear methodological position. 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, in addition to appreciating other aspects of those societies which may well not be understood by one's informants, but which may also be relevant to our own political stance. For the fact is, as Tamas Hofer points out, that the East European countries have all taken their separate paths in the socialist period. I would add, on the basis of some slight firsthand acquaintance with all of them, that legitimacy varies greatly also, and I believe that anthropological research needs to take into account that societies have been differentially affected by varying state policies, and that we should assess these differences critically. In other words I 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.

On the positive side, I would like to enter a plea for more comparative work within the region, as well as for searching for the appropriate levels of comparison with other regions of the world. A very rudimentary comparative sketch of some differences in paths of socioeconomic development is outlined at the end of my Polish community study (see Book Note in this issue). But it is surely time to do more in this direction, and essential to do so if we are ever to present our region coherently to interested outsiders, including the main body of anthropologists. This should be the hallmark of our discipline, in contrast to the traditions of descriptive national ethnography which most of the East European countries developed for themselves. Hofer, following Wallace, referred rather disdainfully in his 1968 article (*Current Anthropology* 9:311-315) to a "slash and burn" style in Anglo-Saxon anthropology. I would suggest that our East Europeanist anthropology now needs more elements of this approach, with every country specialist forcing himself to look at all the material coming from the other countries, going to

some of the others if he can, and endeavoring to reach comparative conclusions. This should be our primary aim scientifically, and, at the same time, this in itself provides adequate ethical justification both in our own societies and in theirs