

## CORRESPONDENCE: REPLY TO MICHAŁ BUCHOWSKI

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Though we have recently discussed some of the same issues at conferences, the published version of Michał Buchowski's critique of Western anthropological work dealing with Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Hierarchies of Knowledge in Central-Eastern European Anthropology, *AEER* 22(2):5-14) contained some sharp surprises for me. This response is offered in the same spirit, and I am sure that our friendship will survive!

1. Buchowski is obviously correct in most of what he says about 'hierarchies of knowledge.' World-wide it is the English language that dominates the discipline. Even in CEE, English tends nowadays to be the *lingua franca* (previously this role was played by German; almost half a century of Soviet domination did little to establish Russian in this role). As a result, Anglo-American scholars such as myself enjoy advantages that we do not deserve. I have always been aware of this, and never more so than in recent years while working in Germany and struggling to master the old *lingua franca* of the region. Let me note here that the inequities of international scholarly publishing affect scholars in Germany in the same way as those who struggle to establish journals in Poznań, Ljubljana, etc. We too, at the Max Planck Institute (MPI), spend a lot of time and energy preparing camera-ready copy for subsidized publications which we then circulate in exactly the same informal ways described by Buchowski. (My general plea to all fellow actors in this unsatisfactory market is simply this: please try to arrange for editing by a native speaker, and please take the trouble to include an Index.)

2. Having acknowledged this basic injustice, what can one do about it apart from hand-wringing? Buchowski's critique moves at various levels. At the general theoretical level, he suggests that 'the field of postsocialist study' is best seen as an invention of Western scholarship. He is not the first to draw on Said's 'orientalism' as an analogy. But

whereas I have argued (Hann 1995)<sup>1</sup> that anthropologists can provide the corrective to such orientalizing tendencies, it seems that for Buchowski we are among the main culprits. I find this charge highly exaggerated.

3. For Buchowski the problem has roots in the works carried out by Westerners in the socialist period. The problem with my monograph of a village in South-East Poland (Hann 1985) is apparently not that I failed to pay sufficient attention to Polish scholarship but that only two authors listed in the select bibliography were 'ethnographers.' I can only plead that I found the works of rural sociologists and historians more relevant to my modest project than the works of ethnographers, whose general interest in the traditional 'folk culture' was not of much use to me in examining a community that was a product of 1940s ethnic cleansing. Buchowski himself has told us (1997) that his ethnographer colleagues by and large ignored contemporary social issues in the villages. I cannot think of any Polish ethnographers at the time of my project who combined an interest in Western anthropology with serious fieldwork on socio-economic issues in their own society. This changed only in the 1990s, when scholars such as Zdzisław Mach, Jacek Nowak, and Buchowski himself carried out important empirical projects. Their studies would be highly relevant to my project, were I to begin it afresh. But in the 1980s, when I got to know Michał Buchowski in Cambridge, he wanted to discuss rationality with Ernest Gellner and shamanism with Stephen Hugh-Jones. He showed only a minimal polite interest in my project in his own country, and I never expected more. How could I possibly

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of those home-made publications typical of Eastern Europe, and it lacks an index. It was actually made when I was still based in Britain and is available from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kent (Canterbury). I am also open to 'stone age' direct-exchange offers of the sort described by Buchowski.

have asked him to read and criticize my work, when it was obvious that his own intellectual interests lay elsewhere? (Others in Michał Buchowski's Department in Poznań did express interest in what I might be doing in a Carpathian village. I recall being visited in the field by two enthusiastic students of *Etnografia*, as the discipline was still called; but they could not really understand my concern to document the prevailing economic and political structures, just as I could muster little intellectual interest in their project to photograph and catalogue the roadside religious monuments of the region.)

4. Leaving aside such ancient personal history, I am more perturbed by the accusation that the MPI in Halle, where I have worked since 1999, is discriminating against CEE scholars and privileging the work of Westerners. This charge needs to be placed in the context of the changing anthropological field in CEE. As in other former socialist countries, the terrain is far from stable. There has been some opening up to Western anthropological styles, and the entire issue of *AEER* in which Buchowski's piece was published is an example of the kinds of influence that appear to be spreading. For some CEE scholars in anthropology/ethnography, all change is unwelcome, while for others it has been taking place much too slowly. At the MPI we have made a point of inviting scholars with a more traditional orientation in 'folklore' as well as colleagues whose research orientation is closer to our own. We do not see ourselves as missionaries, and all our own researchers are encouraged to form non-exploitative partnerships with local scholars in the countries in which they carry out their research.

5. Let me give some more specific data to illustrate what I am saying. Buchowski would perhaps agree that nothing is more important for the future of our subject than the training of PhD students. Prompted by his critical article, I drew up a list of the students we currently support and those who have already completed their doctorates in my Department. The thirteen students are divided equally between East and West: 4 West Germans, 1

Italian, 1 American, 2 Romanians, 1 Estonian, 1 Slovak, 1 Bulgarian, 1 Pole, and 1 East German! Among the 'Easterners,' three are working primarily in their own societies, while all the others have had to face the same linguistic hurdles that I had to face in Poland a generation ago. But regardless of whether they are in some sense working 'at home,' all students spend at least 12 months collecting data in the field before returning to the MPI for the 'writing-up' phase. It may seem inadequate to define a discipline in terms of its research methods but I suggest that this emphasis upon long-term immersion in the field is perhaps the main feature distinguishing our kind of anthropology from the usual practices of the colleagues with whom we work in CEE and other postsocialist countries – including such innovative bridge-builders as Buchowski.<sup>2</sup>

6. This, then, might be the basis for an answer to Michał Buchowski. If he and other 'local scholars' wish to be as widely read as some of the outsiders who write about CEE, then they need to put in the field time and write monographs of equivalent depth and sophistication. In this respect Buchowski's *Cahier* of 1997, published by the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin, which he himself describes as an essay, is thin in comparison with one of its sources of inspiration, Nagengast (1991). It

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<sup>2</sup> It would be a retrospective rationalization to claim that such fieldwork was an explicitly formulated criterion for inclusion in my edited collections on Socialism and Postsocialism, criticized by Buchowski for their imbalance; but he might bear in mind that the first of these volumes was the product of a conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Britain and the Commonwealth; I had little control over the papers that were offered (including several on "African Socialism"), though the organizers did go to a lot of trouble to raise funds to support the participation of Russian and CEE colleagues. The second volume was indeed the result of invitations issued to attend a launch conference for my Department at the MPI in 2000. The aim was to give as broad a view as possible of the anthropological work that had been undertaken in the 1990s, both regionally and thematically. Rural change was covered in this volume by Western colleagues with a much longer record of fieldwork-based research than Michał Buchowski.

can of course be argued that such 'Malinowskian' fieldwork is but a poor second-best for the accumulated insider knowledge of the 'native ethnographer.' Tamás Hofer addressed these issues more than thirty years ago, arguing that the two perspectives were different but complementary (see the republication of this classic essay with a new Preface by the author in Hann, Sárkány, and Skalník 2005; note that all of the contributors to this volume apart from myself are natives of the country whose anthropological history they document!). Even though much has changed in recent years, including new forms of fieldwork by CEE scholars, it seems premature to speak of a full disciplinary convergence.

7. I would question whether such convergence is desirable anyway. Why should CEE scholars try harder to write books about CEE that compete with the products of foreign scholars for publication by Cornell, Cambridge, or some other prestigious player in the market that is dominated by the Anglo-Americans? Is this the only career option open to them? The entire thrust of Buchowski's contribution is to complain that the voices of Westerners who write about CEE are louder than those of the local scholars. Nowhere in his article does he consider the possibility that CEE anthropologists might take advantage of postsocialist freedoms to embark on anthropological projects outside their home countries. This seems to me regrettable. It seems that virtually every contributor in the issue of AEER in which his article appeared is speaking from a national perspective; in this sense rather little has changed, the CEE ethnographers/anthropologists are still confining themselves to their national frames. But Michał Buchowski is an internationally respected scholar who has spent many years conducting research outside his country. Might he not consider spending a year in the field somewhere, anywhere, instead of doing his fieldwork at home and confining his foreign trips to academic institutions? If he were to do this, he might find himself having to develop complex working relations with the 'local scholars' – and feeling some of the

same exasperation that I felt when reading his AEER contribution! I suggest that this experience would place him in a better position to undertake similar in-depth work in his own country, and thus to compete more effectively in that sector of the market.

8. Of course one solution to Buchowski's problem is that we should all do our fieldwork at home; apart from visits to each other's academic institutions!

9. My own view is that there is much to be gained from working elsewhere, especially early in one's career. If linguistic and financial conditions can be fulfilled, I encourage all PhD students to work outside their home societies (at present this is not realistic for us at the MPI, mainly because we are unable to offer more than 3 years funding). I believe this is the best way for theoretical as well as empirical progress to occur in our discipline. As an example I would cite the work of Yulian Konstantinov, the Bulgarian anthropologist whose work on the informal economy has added significantly to our knowledge of postsocialist developments in his native country. Nonetheless, his recent fieldwork has been mostly based on the Kola peninsula of Northern Russia; following this research, carried out in cooperation with MPISA's Siberian Studies Centre, he and his student Vladislava Vladimirova have contributed the concept of *sovkhovism* to the anthropological tool-kit (2002). Personally I find this idea, as it is developed in their ethnography, more inspiring than the intellectual pyrotechnics that appear to be suffusing some anthropology programs in some CEE countries these days (the concept might also prove useful in analyzing Buchowski's own materials from Poland). I have much sympathy with students who react to some of the new courses now on offer in CEE with the sentiment that, "if that is really what socio-cultural anthropology is all about nowadays, then better to sign up for a traditional ethnography course and document the vanishing folk culture by making two-week excursions to the countryside, just as our predecessors have done since the nineteenth century!"

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