

**BOOK REVIEW: *POLITICAL CULTURE IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE*, FRITZ PLASSER
AND ANDREAS PRIBESKY, EDITORS, 1996, BROOKFIELD, VT: AVEBURY.**

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For many cultural anthropologists, the concepts of "political culture" typically used by political scientists suffer from impoverished theories of both politics and culture. Often, political scientists use the term "political culture" as a catch-all to describe all those aspects of institutionalized political life which are not readily explained by an analysis of economic performance or political elite. Alternatively, the "civic culture" approach to political culture tends to rank countries in a unilinear developmental scale (p.4). According to this approach, a given country's political culture may be judged according to its similarity to the American model of civic culture. Pribesky and Plasser, the editors of *Political Culture in East Central Europe*, attempt to bring a more historically and culturally nuanced approach to the question of political culture, producing a volume with numerous essays of interest to cultural anthropologists working on East-Central Europe.

The editors bring together sixteen essays by political scientists from Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Slovakia. The first section of the book discusses definitions of political culture and qualitative and quantitative research methods. Gregor Matjan's chapter on lifestyle concepts builds upon the work of Michael Thompson and Aaron Wildavsky. Andreas Pribesky's essay on symbolic dimensions of political culture offers a brief but informative treatment of "paternalism" as a key political concept in Hungarian politics. His essay is refreshing because it maps the use of paternalistic discourses in party statements and slogans across the political spectrum, rather than simply taking for granted the role of paternalism in East Central European politics.

The second part of the book consists of sections on Croatia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Austria, and Slovakia. Many of the essays treat questions of political culture with a great deal of sensitivity to historical context and meaning-making processes. I will highlight those chapters which are most interesting to cultural anthropologists. Igor Luksic's essay, "Political Culture in Slovenia" begins with an articulate critique of the "civic culture" approach. His analysis of Slovenian political culture touches

upon metaphors used to describe government and society, as well as the role of religion and state socialism in forming contemporary Slovene's political imagination.

The two chapters on Hungarian political culture likewise combine anthropological approaches with empirical political science research. Attila Ágh's essay considers the tension between "Europeanizing" and nationalist discourses in party politics from 1989 to 1994. Máté Szabó's piece draws extensively from sociological theories on social movements and tracks changes in the aims, structures, and strategies of protest actions over the course of the transition from state socialism.

Gregor Meseznikov's chapter investigates populism and nationalism in contemporary Slovak political debates, making an interesting contention that political oppositions such as "paternalism vs. liberalism" cut across right/left distinctions and bear further inspection. Karin Liebhart's "Political Culture in Austria" highlights the need to study silences in political discourses. Citing the example of postwar politicians' denial and suppression of Austria's Nazi past, Liebhart criticizes political science research which focuses solely on attitudes articulated in opinion polls. In the last chapter in the collection, Hans-Georg Heinrich compares Russian and East Central European political cultures. While the author points out numerous contrasts between the two regions' historical experiences and cultures of government, he cautions those who champion "Central European-ness" a key factor influencing political life in East Central Europe: "the elite and masses of today were formed during the final stages of Real Socialism" (p. 233).

Despite the editors' definition of political culture as "historically informed and historically variable attitudes, evaluations, and practices of politics" (p. xi), quite a few of the chapters report on public opinion research in a relatively uncritical manner, without significant historical analysis or cultural context. Some of the opinion poll questions, such as "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, or not satisfied with democracy in your country?" (21), appear

immediately ridiculous to anthropologists. As David Anderson points out in his ethnographic analysis of Siberian villagers, postsocialist political culture quite often revolves around wildly contested interpretations of such concepts as "democracy" (Anderson, in Hann and Dunn, eds., 1996). While opinion polls can be useful, researchers using this method would be well-advised to pay closer attention to questions of meaning and interpretation when composing and analyzing surveys.

Despite these faults, *Political Culture in East Central Europe* suggests many possible points of contact and exchange between cultural anthropologists and political scientists working on

political culture. The explosion of interest in matters of political culture in East Central Europe in both disciplines means that political scientists and anthropologists will enter into discussion with one another. The many thoughtful essays in this collection suggest that such a discussion may even prove enjoyable.

References Cited

- Hann, Chris and Elizabeth Dunn, eds., 1996, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. New York: Routledge.