

***Changing Economies and Changing Identities in Postsocialist Eastern Europe*, eds. Ingo W. Schröder and Asta Vonderau. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008, 240 pp. Preface. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Paper bound. ISBN: 978-3-8258-1121-1.**

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The book edited by Ingo W. Schröder and Asta Vonderau makes a convincing argument for the use of class in analyzing the postsocialist transformations in Eastern Europe. It originates in the shared interest of the authors in the connections between economic change and changes in identity in the region over the last two decades. The book consists of twelve chapters organized in two sections on the “(Re)Constitution of Collective Identities” and the “(Re)Negotiation of Selves,” as well as one of “Concluding Remarks.”

With the devaluation of Marxism-Leninism after the collapse of state socialism, the concept of class lost its appeal as analytical concept and as political vehicle. This process is accentuated by the transformations in the late-capitalist economy when the regime of flexible accumulation tends to conceal the structural bases of class while, at the same time, emphasizing consumption as a key domain for economic accumulation and for the creation of collective identity. As Ingo W. Schröder argues in the first chapter, the complex relations between capitalism, class, and local forms of consumption make class difficult to approach within the framework of classical Marxist theory (p.6).

This, however, is not the sheer end of class. The more flexible forms of class identity can be approached by paying attention to their cultural underpinnings and drawing simultaneously on the writings of Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu. Such a theoretical turn shifts attention from notions of collective interests and actions to those of class positioning and identity. Schröder’s argument ends with a caveat: While the cultural premises of class formation are key ingredients of the analysis, the anthropologist has to acknowledge the conceptual similarities but not to confuse the distinct processes contributing to the formation of class and cultural identity.

In the second chapter, Neringa Klumbytė treats nostalgia as “social practice and cultural artifact,” an important ingredient in processes of collective identification. A discourse about the past, nostalgic recollections reveal just as much about the moment when they are articulated and of the socio-economic position of those reproducing them (the “people,” the “small Lithuania” [p.38]) as about the past they reference. Klumbytė’s chapter speaks well to the contribution by Oleg Pachenkov and Lilia Voronkova in the second part of the book. The two perform an ethnography of the largest flea markets in Saint Petersburg and Berlin, treating them as “social and cultural institutions” where identity-building is mediated by the consumption of a particular kind of material things (p.194). They distinguish between the “nostalgic recollection” (p.195) of elderly Russians through which some of the old Soviet culture is being reconstituted and the “mythological nostalgia” of present Berliners, evaluating critically the complicity of the later with forms of consumption stimulated by late-capitalism.

Michał Buchowski illustrates quite well the diversity within the category of the middle class – one employed frequently both by Eastern European lay discourses and by academic languages – when documenting its reorganization in rural Poland. Although trying to avoid forms of cultural essentialism that represent identity as being determined by culture, Buchowski stays close to Bourdieu’s understanding of capital and uses vivid ethnographic examples to illustrate the role played by particular forms of cultural consumption (e.g., listening to disco-polo music, or particular residential styles) in the experiences of the middle class. A re-study of the processes documented during the 1990s (when the article originates) would have been very helpful in showing whether Buchowski’s “middle class” kept its internal diversity or if it split into alternative forms of social classification.

The last two chapters of the first section report on rural Poland and Bulgaria. Anastazija Pilichowska focuses on the centrality of the categories of land and work for the articulation of Polish peasants’ local identities during shifting political regimes: socialism, the systematic transformations after its collapse, and the European Union. Zlatina Bogdanova works with a Weberian concept of class—in the making of which wealth, prestige, and power are intertwined—in order to document the increasing social differentiations in rural Bulgaria. Work, embedded in the framework of kinship and gender, is simultaneously the basis and the justification of growing economic inequalities and class hierarchies.

The sixth and seventh chapters provide interesting parallels between the social construction of the self in two Baltic countries. Asta Vonderau investigates the ways notions of “good life” and “successful individuals” are central for the emerging business elites in Lithuania. Their subjectivities are contrasted to the image of *homo sovieticus* – a “hypocritical and schizophrenic” model of the person for her informants (p. 123). The possession and consumption of material goods serves as a projection of the self and helps construct a “class on paper” (p.126) premised on similar social positions and experiences rather than common interest. At the same time, Agnese Cimdina’s approach to the self-understanding of Latvian business men involved in economic exchanges with Norwegian partners illustrates well how contrastive identities and the image of otherness emerge when mutual expectations fail.

The more radical ideologies appearing in postsocialist Eastern Europe are also examined in the book. Vihra Barova’s chapter documents the transformations of Bulgarian youth subcultures brought about by the collapse of socialism. Manifesting an anticommunist attitude before 1989, the diverse punk groups spinning off from the former alternative movement adopt anti-western, anti-capitalist, nationalistic, and extreme right-wing positions. Their trajectories are explained by the emerging class structure in Bulgaria, as both the new punks and the right-wingers identify with the working class. In his contribution, Victor C. de Munck describes the millenarism of new (successful) Lithuanians articulated around the metaphysical qualities of money. Although unlike the cargo cults of Melanesia Lithuanian millenarism is individualistic and does not coalesce into a social movement, it expresses a fundamental orientation towards the West during a period of epochal historical transformations.

The last two chapters by Steven Sampson and Elizabeth Dunn do an excellent job to underline the contributions of the volume while avoiding a conclusive tone. Steven Sampson encourages the further study of “identifying” or “identification” as social processes. He also recommends the focus on “technologies of identification” (“the practices and tools that serve as markers or instruments for achieving life projects” [p. 221]) as a way to understand contemporary class formations. Elizabeth Dunn calls for a new theory of the formation and reproduction of social inequality. The premises of this theory are the study of the triadic relations between political economy, subjectivity, and social relations, as well as the ethnography of the subjective experience of class emerging from the underlying political process.

The volume could have benefited from examples from other East European countries and from a more explicit discussion of the ways class is being reconfigured in diverse postsocialist and postcolonial contexts. The authors could have also focused on the local historical factors contributing to the devaluation of Marxism and leftist social theory which seem to recede to the background yet are not entirely displaced by late-modern ideologies. Also, a sharper distinction between class and alternative forms of social identification in postsocialism (of which ethnicity is probably the most conspicuous) could have sharpened the arguments of the editors.

In spite of the questions that it further incites, the volume is a notable contribution to the current debates about anthropological knowledge production on and in Eastern Europe. It is well theorized and draws on subtle ethnography. While several ethnographic chapters could be read in undergraduate courses on the cultures and societies of Eastern Europe, the more theoretical chapters would be a very useful addition to syllabi on the anthropology of postsocialism. It makes a compelling case for the renewed interest in class formation and identity as key processes in the historical transformations in the region.