

Western Anthropologists in Eastern Europe Continued

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Chris Hann replies to the open letter from Michael Sozan published in the last issue of the Newsletter, concerning Hann's article "A Comment from Western Europe" published two issues ago (Newsletter, 5:1:3-4).

Dear Michael,

You added such large measures of irony and sarcasm to your open letter (Newsletter, 5:2:2-3) that in places I am unsure of your exact meaning. However, since you conclude by expressing a hope for fruitful scholarly debate, I shall assume you mean to be provocative in a constructive way and do my best to respond.

You rebuke me for failing to provide even a cursory definition of "legitimacy". I accept this criticism. The word was placed in quotation marks exactly because many anthropologists may feel uncomfortable with it. It might have been wiser to offer a definition and dispense with the additional punctuation.

I am not competent to rise to your challenge and discuss political philosophies. In writing about legitimacy I wished to refer to the degree of popular consent, acceptance, satisfaction, etc., that a society expresses towards its ruling elites. I believe this is roughly how sociologists and political scientists use the term. Those elites are dominated throughout Eastern Europe by Communist Parties, but this fact does not to my mind render the question of legitimacy a formality or a foregone conclusion, either from the point of view of the society itself, or from that of an observer interested in the degree to which a government or a state system is succeeding in meeting the needs of its population.

Specifically (and my views here obviously result from my experiences in the countries which I know best), I would suggest that the regime in Hungary enjoys a high degree of legitimacy, for reasons which have much more to do with pragmatic economic policies than with its historical origins or its ideological adherence to some "Leninist notion of governing". Indeed I am not sure that what you call "Leninist legitimacy" has much relevance at all to Hungary today. The situation has changed a good deal even since the time of our fieldwork in the 1970s; for

example, contested elections are now common at both local and national levels. The system is gradually coming to tolerate a much greater degree of pluralism ("pluralism?").

Judging from Eva Huseby-Darvas's review of your recent book (in the same volume of the Newsletter), you found that Hungarian villagers have lost local independence and gained only more bureaucratic corruption in the socialist period. Yet I would be surprised if the villagers of Tap were seriously discontented with the socialist system as such. A comparison with post-peasants in a neighbouring capitalist state can be very interesting, but probably more important from the point of view of legitimacy is to understand just how much has changed for the better under socialism, especially after collectivisation.

This is how I understand the Hungarian rural scene, and I see one of the anthropologists's jobs as being to provide the authentic documentation which will enable other social scientists (and wider audiences) to reach safer conclusions about legitimacy. There is an excellent sociological analysis of the Hungarian rural transformation by Swain (1) which in my opinion does reach safe conclusions. It sounds, again judging only from your reviewer, as if your own work may provide local confirmation and deeper understanding of a phenomenon which the sociologists Szelenyi and Mandrin (2) have called "interrupted embourgeoisement" (the argument being that in the present phase of socialist development the more prosperous households seem to be the descendants of those who were on an 'embourgeoisement' path before the socialist period; they now have the cultural and intellectual resources to reassume their prominence). This does not seem a particularly "Leninist" outcome! Be that as it may, I shall certainly look forward to reading your work.

The main point of my earlier article was to call for more comparative work. Whatever your convictions about the Hungarian polity, had you done fieldwork in Poland in the 1980s you would have seen a socialist polity in an advanced state of disintegration, undergoing what some sociologists have appropriately termed a "legitimation crisis". (3) I sought to probe the causes of that crisis of legitimation for one section of Polish society, namely the numerous section living in the countryside, a most important part of the whole. I also had long experience of city life in Poland. Now, although there may be a significant group of so-called dissidents in Budapest, and although "corruption" (definition please?) may be a serious and intensifying problem in Hungary, the scale of these phenomena was altogether different in Poland. I was using the concept of legitimacy as a shorthand in probing the cynicism and disaffection present in very

large groups. (Ultimately, of course, most citizens will always remain loyal to their state; it is the only one they have got, and the patriotic card is regularly and successfully played by governments which, by the standards of many observers, would deserve at the very least to be unpopular - but this raises further issues which there is no space to pursue, and perhaps no call for anthropologists to pursue.)

I repeat, the main point of my earlier piece was to suggest that anthropologists help to bring out the major differences between the socialist states of Eastern Europe (including Yugoslavia, by all means!). Unlike you, I am interested in explaining the observed variation not in terms of "individual personality" but in terms of history, political culture and economic development strategy in the socialist period. I find this kind of diversity much more interesting, and also consider it important that non-academic audiences in the West understand it better. To stress ideological resemblances and the lip service still paid to Lenin, is, in my opinion, likely to result in misleading perceptions of Eastern Europe.

This is penned in some haste to catch the Newsletter's deadline. I read your letter only in September, upon returning from an intriguing five-month stay in a city in China, (not Taiwan). I conducted no systematic fieldwork on this occasion, but formed the definite impression that the present socialist rulers of the world's most populous state enjoy a high degree of the elusive substance we are talking about; and there too, the causes seem to lie not in the works of deceased political philosophers but in the reforming initiatives of pragmatic economists.

Yours sincerely,
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1. N. Swain, *Collective Farms Which Work?*, 1985.
2. T. Szelenyi and R. Mandrin, *Peasants, proletarians, entrepreneurs: transformations of rural social structure under state socialism*, forthcoming.
3. cf. J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, 1976.