

Anthropological Struggle in Eastern Europe: A Commentary

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David Kideckel contributes the following to the on-going discussion stimulated by John Cole's articles on East European anthropology (Newsletter of the EEAG, 1:2:1-3; 2:1: 2-6 ; 2 :2: 2-10) . Anybody else?

Over the last two years readers of this newsletter have been treated to a disquisition by John Cole on the nature of East European society and East European anthropology. Comments on Cole's pieces by Joel Halpern and Oriol Pi-Sunyer briefly indicated the still unsettled views that we ourselves have of the region, let alone its potential contribution to the discipline. In reading each of these essays I found much in them helpful to sort out these questions but still ultimately equivocal for my own comprehension of the region and its anthropological understanding.

Halpern clearly indicates the integration of East European studies in the historical mainstream of anthropology yet Cole's comments show that, even as the field expanded in number of practitioners, it has never attained a position of reliance for general anthropology. Suggesting that its potential import lies nearly exclusively in Eastern Europe's socialist nature, history of dependency, and developmental ethic, John offers a fairly Manichaean view both of the region vis-a-vis other dependent zones such as Latin America (implicit) and of the anthropological approach to the region compared to the other mainstream, established, "Rightist" views (explicit). Pi-Sunyer rightly expressed reservations about the over-simplification of East European agrarian dependency but also fell prey to a reductionism centered on questions of political control and coercion.

Where does this leave us? I certainly have no immediate answers to either questions of regional essences or potential contributions. However, I would like to try and define some common themes in these issues if only to try and understand the specific contexts in which they are raised. By recognizing the environment in which we operate, future steps might be more apparent and successful for our research, relevance, and understanding.

Re-reading the previous Newsletters in preparing this comment it struck me that there are remarkable parallels both in our circumstances within anthropology and in the nature of East European social systems. A key theme in both is that of struggle, self-determination, and the ability to be taken seriously by significant others.

In Eastern Europeanist anthropology our struggle is largely one to define basic meanings. Cole is correct in pointing out the ways in which we diverge from mainstream area studies and both he and Halpern indicate some of our problems in recognition in anthropology. You might say that Eastern Europeanist anthropology is to Eastern European Area studies what Eastern Europe is to other anthropology -- minor off-shoots at best or, more often, terra incognita. Our falling between these disciplinary cracks, so to speak, need not be as detrimental as we occasionally paint it. True, figuring-out what we're all about is made more difficult by these loose connections with established research traditions. However, this gives us the latitude to make use of a wide variety of separate disciplinary inputs and new intellectual currents to develop a more elegant synthesis of our subject. As Cole suggests, we are (or can be) on the cutting edge of both East European area studies and general anthropology though this potential position is due only in part to the socialist, developmental nature of the region.

Similarly, in Eastern Europe the wholesale transformations of society provide opportunities for the redefinition of the self and others. But, as in our field, the possibilities for redefinition and the characteristics of the redefined self are subject to the control of established powers. The individual has difficulty in making sense and finding meaning in a world where his personal attributes and most basic tenets are given little credence and even whole nations within the region struggle for that same measure of self-knowledge, self-determination, and recognition within the larger world arena.

To be sure, we can trace the material causes of these personal, disciplinary, and national battles. For ourselves, they exist due to the compartmentalization of the sciences in modern, industrial (capitalist) society and the practical requirements of economic and political control which Western education abets. For Eastern Europe, they arise in part due to the past history and current revivification of dependency, the schizophrenia of rapid social transformation, and the prevailing relations of political domination formed in concert with these first two conditions. Despite their different origins and the diversity of the systems in which they operate, these struggles reverberate-in similar ways. Both can cause nagging self-doubt, a sense of

unworthiness or persecution (just ask any unemployed Ph.D. in East Europeanist anthropology), and an ultimate deflection from initial goals which, in both East European socialist society and East European anthropology (if I am not hopelessly naive), consisted of a concern to promote a more humane and egalitarian world. Confused about the concerns which motivated us in the first place we instead replace them with newly defined ends of "influence, "uniqueness,~ "making the plan," or "remaking the peasantry."

Yet another parallel joining Eastern Europe as social system and the anthropology of the region is the moment we currently share in our respective histories. In Eastern Europe the heady days of economic expansion, rapid industrial development, and great possibilities for upward class mobility now seem illusory. They have been replaced by multibillion dollar debts to Western banks, increase (if not vocalized) rejection of party legitimacy, and even party uncertainty as to its own role and choice of policies. There is a pressing need to reexamine the premises on which current policies and practices are based. A massive renewal is called for so that the energies taken up by muddling through can be released for social reconstruction. While these are not evil empires, neither do they approach the platonic republic with its own guardians assisting in all approaching truth and goodness.

Our own field, having achieved its major growth in the expansionist period after World War II is tied to regional developments in a direct fashion. In addition, because of the peculiarities of research in the region -- i.e, we are generally there with host government approval and assistance -- we have somewhat of a stake in the status quo though not wedded to it inextricably. In these circumstances, then, we too are confronted with the need for renewal and to assist with our own research efforts as those social systems striving to-be born in Eastern Europe. To our credit, most of us are neither "government hacks" producing essay after essay of received Cold War wisdom nor re-gime toadies stretching the bounds of scientific credulity with whitewash and justification. However, rarely do we "tell it like it is" though, with our unique "pig's eye" perspective we are in a unique position to do so. Rather than focus on socialism -a strategy to solve the problems of a set of poverty-stricken agrarian states through industrialization, urbanization, and (agricultural reorganization), as Cole would have it -- we ought to make "actually existing socialism," i.e. the current social systems as they really operate, our chief concern. While this would recognize the difficult base at which most European states set out on their path to development and the many successes and achievements along the way so

it would also consider the manner by which these processes have gone awry and the often large human costs of the process.

There is no question but that the attack on knowledge is a real one in the United States today and there are those who would reinforce our ignorance to achieve some narrow political purpose. However, a monolithic "right" is as hyperbolic a notion as monolithic communism was in its day. Though the nature of the East European society is certainly misrepresented in this attack on knowledge so, too, is feminism, environmentalism and automobile airbags. Under these circumstances we do ourselves, our informants, and science in general a disservice by over-embellishing and stereotyping the characteristics of our adversaries. (We must remember, for example, that it is the Western bankers who support the continued extension of favorable credit terms to Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia).

In other words, we as a group of individuals with joint interests in Eastern Europe and anthropology, are positioned between the current, and no doubt continuing, struggles in Western Science and East European society. We can best contribute to both by developing an anthropology liberated from the accepted formulae of each and devoted not to seeing the regional present as reflected in its underdeveloped past but to conceiving of its future (and our own) and undertaking research to help achieve it.

In this, as Cole points out, we can be ably assisted and motivated by the example of our East European colleagues who have been clearly forthright and insightful about the nature of their own societies. "Actually existing socialism" is, after all, a phrase borrowed from Rudolf Bahro who, along with M. Haraszti, G. Konrad, I Szelenyi and the "Budapest school" in Hungary, the Praxis group in Yugoslavia, and other well-known or anonymous East European social scientists, examine East European realities from the perspective of those who live them.