

***Postsocialist Europe: Anthropological Perspectives from Home.* Ed. László Kürti and Peter Skalník. Vol. 10, *EASA Series*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009. x, 336 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. \$ 85.00, hard bound**

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The book, edited by two leading figures of Eastern European anthropology “at home”, offers an interesting selection of essays on postsocialist East-Central Europe, with a strong focus on political economy. Four of the eleven chapters deal with politics (gender and governance in rural Slovakia, the Czech military, the gay and lesbian movement in Poland and a comprehensive study of political anthropology of the Czech Republic), four other chapters with economic issues (property relations, class, and labor in rural Poland, rabbit farming under capitalism in Hungary, homelessness in Hungary, and work in international enterprises). These are complemented by two studies on transnationalism (on return migration to post-soviet Lithuania and on Ukrainian migrants in the Czech Republic) and one chapter on the Slovenian alternative music scene.

As edited volumes go, the scope of the topics covered, as well as of the contributions’ quality, is rather heterogeneous. In all, however, the editors have done a decent job of achieving a certain thematic coherence due to their concentration on issues of politics and economy, on ethnography and on classical (as opposed to postmodern) anthropological theories. So far this would look like another collection of essays on postsocialist Eastern Europe, but something is different here, as this book is the only international collection of its kind so far with contributions exclusively from Eastern European scholars (except for the afterword by Christian Giordano).

The selection of authors bears witness to the editors’ goal to show Eastern European anthropology “at home” as something qualitatively different from foreign, “Western” anthropology. In their introduction the editors outline their aim to engage processes of change and the postsocialist situation from a different perspective than other studies have done, since “the flow of anthropological theories of socialist and postsocialist societies is still overwhelmingly unbalanced and unidirectional” (p. 18). Kürti and Skalník identify “regionality” and “marginality” as the most important defining concepts not only of Eastern European societies at large but also of Eastern European anthropology. They argue for an analogy between postsocialism and postcolonialism. Like postcolonial scholars have done, they see indigenous (Eastern European) anthropology marginalized with regard to the mainstream of discourses, publications, and articles, not to mention its institutional and numerical weakness. This marginality, they

claim, has led to an unjustified privileging of ethnographies by Western authors over the work of local scholars: “Anthropologists living and working in the society they study may offer alternative views concerning their home countries compared to those who visit for the single purpose of conducting fieldwork research at a particular moment in time” (p. 8). Therefore, the goal set by Kürti and Skalník for this volume is to demonstrate that local Eastern European ethnographies are “more substantiated” (p. 19) than those by Western colleagues. Giving more attention to them will help to overcome the secondary status of Eastern European anthropologists in the field of global academic discourse and to give a more balanced view of social processes in Eastern Europe by providing a view from home and from “below”, that is, from a local perspective. Some chapters highlight very well the book’s potential of offering locally-informed microhistories of social processes in Eastern Europe. One example is Michael Buchowski’s historical-ethnographic study of agricultural property relations and their social and cultural consequences, based on long-term fieldwork in the village of Dziekanowice. The study traces land ownership from Prussian times through socialism to the present day, when people’s relationship to land creates different cultural values and social identities of farmers, agricultural workers, industrial laborers with small plots of land, and white-collar workers without ownership of land. Two other chapters provide interesting insights on how partisan scholarship can fruitfully feed back into the analytical level: Grazyna Kubica’s study of reactions in Poland on the gay and lesbian March of Tolerance which she herself participated in and Rajko Mursic’s historical-ethnographic study of the alternative music scene in Slovenia, which he undertook as both a scholar and a musician. Mursic sees a dialectic of scholarly influence on music scenes and music’s influence on his own scholarly position and argues for a “punk anthropology” as a possible alternative to the mainstream.

Each reader may develop her/his own impression whether this ambitious goal has been realized by the chapters in this book. To my mind, these by and large well-written and researched studies are unduly overburdened by the editors’ far reaching political intentions. They ultimately (and probably inevitably) fail to demonstrate where the fundamental difference between studies done by “indigenous” and “foreign” anthropologists lies. Moreover, while there are numerous good reasons for giving a voice to local Eastern European anthropologists, it appears too simple to reify “home” and “foreign” as fundamentally different perspectives only with regard to locality and nationality, rather than taking into consideration other characteristics like e. g. class, age, and gender in identifying degrees of distance and closeness to the research field. The seemingly clear distinction between “home” and “foreign” is further complicated by the fact that several of the “native” East European anthropologists represented here were trained at Western universities. Despite making reference to some local publications, the contributions ultimately fail to offer results that are discernibly different from similar studies written by Western scholars. Thus the book’s merits in propagating a substantially

different perspective appear somewhat doubtful, but it still presents several important contributions to the field of ethnographies of postsocialist societies that complement previous edited volumes on the topic. It will probably appeal most to a readership already familiar with some of those other publications on postsocialist settings. One final critical remark must be made concerning the uneven quality of the texts' English translation which is rather faulty in some chapters, especially in the afterword.