

Transformations in Eastern Europe

An Ethnological Approach

Introduction by Wolfgang Kaschuba and Peter Niedermüller

The historical events that took place in the formerly socialist countries in 1989 and 1990 not only confronted the traditional historical, social and political sciences – such as Eastern European Studies or Soviet Studies – with the need to redefine themselves, they also aroused new scholarly interest. In addition to history, sociology and political science, which had previously appropriated central positions in this area of research, ethnology and cultural anthropology are today intensifying their efforts to interpret processes of transformation in Eastern Europe. However, the landscape of ethnological transformation research is only slowly and gradually taking shape. It is still a new and not very clearly defined field, with two fundamental theoretical questions at its core. First, one must ask what are the actual phenomena, processes and dimensions that ethnological research can grasp and analyze; and does ethnology even have theoretical and methodological tools capable of describing the complex and comprehensive process of transformation. Secondly, one should ask what ethnological research would contribute in terms of knowledge, what the ethnological gaze can flesh out and elaborate in the processes of Eastern European transformation that other disciplines and “other gazes” cannot shed light on. In the following, we attempt to formulate some answers to these questions, and also to sketch briefly the development of ethnological research on transformation.

Locating ethnological transformation research and putting it into an academic historical context is not entirely easy. It seems especially problematic to justify this new scholarly interest based on previous research experience or theoretical lines of inquiry. Folklore Studies, which played a central role in the emergence of European Ethnology, was long interested only

in the “archaic,” what was thought to be lasting cultural traditions in a rural agricultural milieu. For a long time, its practitioners gathered hardly any theoretical or methodological expertise in the analysis of modern societal or cultural systems. Only with the “modernization” of folklore studies (*Volkskunde*) did a more broadly conceived perspective and thereby the examination of modern cultural phenomena become possible (Bausinger et al. 1978). The ethnological research projects with a cultural historical orientation that focused on the process of social change and developments in political culture during the period of European industrialization and modernity contributed to the modernization of the point of view of folklore studies (Kaschuba 1990).

Social and cultural anthropology, the other well-spring of European Ethnology, offer only indirect indications for ethnological transformation research. On one hand, we could point to the classical cultural and social anthropological theories of social change, which admittedly represent societal and cultural developments as ‘natural’ processes that are gradually realized through innovation, assimilation and diffusion. This branch of research has not dealt with abrupt political and societal transformations, but has made it clear that social and cultural change is always a dramatic and complex process (Barnett 1953, Arensberg/Niehoff 1964). On the other hand, one should mention those social anthropological research projects that uncovered and described the political and social composition, political structure and political processes of traditional non-European societies (Firth 1951, Banton ed. 1965). These analyses can hardly offer any theoretical or methodological hints for examining political processes and institutions in modern European societies, although they have contributed to the develop-

ment of a new field of research, which coalesced in the 1960s, calling itself political anthropology. On this new terrain, an attempt was made to create a social anthropological theory of the political, and simultaneously to show how social anthropological methods could be used to explain and elucidate political processes and institutions (Cohen 1969: 117–135). Against this backdrop and in concert with the changing perspective of anthropological scholarship, which was increasingly oriented toward the researcher's 'own' society (Cole 1977), the field of political anthropology gradually broadened and increasingly set its sights on modern capitalism and its political and cultural system. The focus of this interest was and remains today the symbolic order of modern political systems and the symbolic mechanism and symbolic expressions of the exercise of power.

Eastern Europe itself, or rather socialism, has actually been on the periphery of folkloric and ethnological interest. To a great extent, folklore studies relegated the region to an archaeological site, seeking only the last remaining traces of an archaic folk culture, whereas cultural anthropology pursued occasional studies with a particular exotic accent. Only in the early 1970s did this situation slowly shift when cultural and social anthropology discovered Eastern European socialism as a subject for research, although at first research efforts remained both geographically and thematically limited (Jakubowska 1993). The primary focus of this research interest was the connections between societal structure and the new socialist economy in village life (Wedel 1976, Hann 1980, 1985, Sampson 1984), ethnic and national relations (Cole ed. 1981), changes in traditional familial forms, or the role and functions of traditional symbols and rituals under socialism (Halpern/Kideckel 1983). Despite these changes, one must conclude, that up until the time of the collapse of socialism, socialist Eastern Europe actually remained an unknown terrain, or rather one that was characterized by exoticism, stereotypes and cultural illusions (Hann 1993, Verdery 1996: 4–8).

Following the historic collapse of socialism, this situation quickly changed, the process of transformation and its expressions became a

substantial area of cultural and social anthropological research. This new scholarly ambition may possibly be explained by the hope of ethnologists that their methods and approaches could offer new perspectives for transformation research. Certainly, the growing number of ethnographic investigations and ethnological models for explaining the changes in Eastern Europe, instead made the theoretical and methodological difficulties of ethnological transformation research obvious. The question was raised but not really fully discussed as to whether ethnological transformation research meant the continuation of traditional methods and views, that is field work *within* the dramatically changing societies, but in small localities that are visible at a glance, or whether new approaches should be developed in order to be able to shed light on dimensions and perspectives of the transformation process as a whole which had up to that point been little considered: therefore should it be an ethnology of the changing Eastern European societies?

This question of methods vs. theoretical perspectives gains a special meaning in the context of sociological transformation research because the "booming research industry" there regards the fundamental changes in Eastern Europe on a macro level and from a macro perspective exclusively. For this research direction, the political democratization or rather economic and societal modernization comprises the essence of the systemic change, and in this sense has concentrated on the macro level of the Eastern European systemic change. Through this lens it becomes especially visible that in post socialist societies – for the first time in modern history – political, economic, and legal transformations are taking place simultaneously or, if not, will have to be synchronized. Accordingly, the dominant discourse of "transitology" describes post socialism as an historic period of transition, in which the formerly socialist countries build up or rather add on to the economic structures and political institutions of capitalism, thereby compensating for the hitherto lacking or incomplete modernization of the society and carrying it through to completion. In this context, it is being investigated and shown how the systemic change has been conducted on a structural

institutional level, how for example the planned economy has been re-routed by means of privatization into a market economy, how the multiple party system has superseded the one party system, which political institutions of a democratic societal order have been established, how the legal framework of the formerly socialist countries has been overhauled, which political and ideological tendencies may be observed, how the social structure has changed, etc. (Berglund/Dellenbrant eds. 1991, Kovacs ed. 1996).

In any case, it is becoming ever more obvious that although this kind of transformation research is capable of explaining basic aspects of the systemic change in Eastern Europe, simply laying out the structural institutional changes cannot fully explain the social reality of the post socialist societies. Other (complementary) lenses and explanatory models are required; it is necessary to explore those dimensions and areas of systemic change that sociological transformation research has neglected. This is primarily the cognitive or symbolic character of the systemic change, the question being how social and political change is perceived, interpreted and practised, and how life trajectories and life worlds relate to the change.

Today, a decade after the demise of socialism, one can clearly see that these cognitive and symbolic factors significantly influence structural and institutional transformations in terms of their course and efficacy. These transformations themselves then react upon the cultural and symbolic factors, thereby playing a central role in the process of systemic change. The cultural side is often not the result but the prerequisite for the ability and readiness to change. Herewith, a starting point for ethnological transformational research has already been identified. The changing cultural semantic of the transformation process itself as well as the analysis and interpretation of it must be the focal point of the research. The term "cultural semantic" indicates that political actions, ideological theses, or economic regulations in current Eastern European societies produce completely different cultural meanings and mental images, that then become themes in public discourses and thereby influence the course of systemic change. These meanings and images

alter in terms of their cultural semantic over time on the one hand in the course of the transformation process and on the other hand, they have various contents, appropriate to different social milieus or historical horizons. These diverse images, divergent meanings, and heterogeneous semantics create a symbolic space, an arena of discourse in society in which political ideologies and societal visions of order are newly staged. In this way, historical and social change always also remains a *symbolic* process, although in the case of Eastern European systemic change it is not just about symbolic side effects. The point is that the interaction between politics and ideology on the one hand and cultural semantics and symbolic mechanisms on the other hand play a constitutive role.

The understanding of "culture" – which has been ardently discussed in recent years in ethnology (Hannerz 1993, Kaschuba 1995) – plays a very special role particularly in the Eastern European transformation process. Ethnological transformation research must assume that socialism embodied not only a political and economic but primarily also a cultural system. That means that people as well as social groups reflect the political character of socialism in their cultural self-conceptions and expectations, in their every day worlds and life strategies, and their entire cultural praxis, and thereby on the one hand culturally and symbolically "domesticate" the political system of socialism, but on the other hand also culturally adapt themselves to socialism. For the political agents of the Eastern European changes, it is no secret that socialism was not just a political but also a cultural system. Accordingly the general goal of systemic change from the very beginning has been to get rid of socialism as a political system *and* as a culturally coded societal order. The point was not to dismantle an inept political and economic system, it was to simultaneously and profoundly change socialist daily life and the cultural attitudes of the people.

Today, ten years later, one may conclude that the simultaneity of political *and* cultural changes could not be realized. People have not automatically "thrown out" or exchanged their previous cultural conceptions, categories and strategies after the collapse of socialism. Whereas

some abrupt transformation processes took place on the structural institutional level of Eastern European societies in politics, the shift in the cultural system apparently followed its own rules carrying out change only slowly and gradually. It would be a mistake to think that people can and will change their cultural vocabulary and cultural practices as fast as the political system has changed. The assumption that the slower shift in the cultural system would leave the process of political transformations untouched is just as much in error. For the history of recent years demonstrates, the varied intensity of political and cultural changes, the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” has become a central feature of post socialist life and the new social order. The essays by Victor Karady and John Borneman describe – from different points of view – these kinds of social, historical and political processes in Hungary and Germany, in which the reflexive relationship between politics and culture may be observed.

The reflexive relationship between politics and culture plays a significant role in yet another context. Culture embodies the symbolic background of political changes. This means that symbols and rituals not only accompany the political changes in Eastern Europe but that they also represent political systemic change in the form of history, tradition and symbolic meaning. However, very divergent images of the past are thereby mobilized and made current. With great astonishment, the world has recognized that in Eastern Europe, culture, tradition, ethnic and national affiliations and history have once again become points of contention in political conflicts and even wars. We all recall that outdated monarchies suddenly took the floor and that in post socialist societies everywhere public places were renamed, history books were rewritten, and deceased politicians and heroes were newly instated as symbolic figures of the new democracies. Culture, tradition and history have become symbolic and political battlefields in the post socialist countries. A wide range of political forces and societal factions are attempting to represent and impose their own histories and traditions as *the* national history and *the* national tradition. At the same time, these images of the past are supposed to repre-

sent visions for the future of the new societies in which the past is not simply projected into the future but instead the future is retrieved from the past (Giddens 1993: 450). How these processes are constructed, how they proceed and which diverse consequences and their possibilities for interpretation are demonstrated in the essays by Wolfgang Kaschuba, Chris Hann and Peter Niedermüller.

Partial truth – the image that James Clifford once used to describe the epistemological character of anthropological field work (Clifford 1986) has gained a new political and symbolic meaning in post socialist societies today. The only common experience of post socialism seems to be the knowledge that the previous and familiar structures for affirming identity no longer exist. Moreover, there is no comprehensive, collective “narrative,” there are only particular and very diverse experiences and interpretations of the present, all of which however, strive for a hegemonic position – often legitimized by “ethnological” terms, arguments and images. We hope that this issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* can direct the attention of ethnology toward the deeply fragmented social and cultural reality of post socialism and furthermore toward the role that scholarship in many ways plays in it today.

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