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 anthropolog-
y. On this new terrain, an attempt was made to
create a social anthropological theory of the
political, and simultaneously to show how so-
cial 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 capi-
talism 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 expres-
sions 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 ar-
chaeological site, seeking only the last remain-
ing traces of an archaic folk culture, whereas
cultural anthropology pursued occasional stud-
ies 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 re-
mained both geographically and thematically
limited (Jakubowska 1993). The primary focus
of this research interest was the connections
between societal structure and the new social-
ist economy in village life (Wedel 1976, Hann
1980, 1985, Sampson 1984), ethnic and nation-
al relations (Cole ed. 1981), changes in tradi-
tional familial forms, or the role and functions
of traditional symbols and rituals under social-
ism (Halpern/Kideckel 1983). Despite these
changes, one must conclude, that up until the
time of the collapse of socialism, socialist East-
ern 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 anthro-
pological research. This new scholarly ambition
may possibly be explained by the hope of ethnol-
gists that their methods and approaches could
offer new perspectives for transformation re-
search. Certainly, the growing number of eth-
ographic investigations and ethnological mod-
els for explaining the changes in Eastern Eu-
rope, instead made the theoretical and method-
ological difficulties of ethnological transforma-
tion 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 chang-
ing 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 East-
ern European societies?

This question of methods vs. theoretical per-
spectives 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 po-
itical 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 dom-
inant 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 com-
pensating for the hitherto lacking or incom-
plete 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 privatisation into a market economy, how the multi-
ple party system has superseded the one party system, which political institutions of a demo-
cratic 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. (Berg-
In any case, it is becoming ever more obvious
that although this kind of transformation re-
search 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) lens-
es and explanatory models are required; it is
necessary to explore those dimensions and areas
of systemic change that sociological transforma-
tion research has neglected. This is primari-
ly 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 struc-
tural and institutional transformations in terms
of their course and efficacy. These transforma-
tions 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 ethnolog-
cal 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, ideo-
logical theses, or economic regulations in cur-
rent Eastern European societies produce com-
pletely 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 dif-
f erent social milieus or historical horizons. These
diverse images, divergent meanings, and heter-
ogeneous semantics create a symbolic space, an
arena of discourse in society in which political
ideologies and societal visions of order are new-
ly staged. In this way, historical and social
change always also remains a symbolic process,
although in the case of Eastern European sys-
temic change it is not just about symbolic side
effects. The point is that the interaction be-
tween 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 eth-
nology (Hannerz 1993, Kaschuba 1995) – plays
a very special role particularly in the Eastern
European transformation process. Ethnologi-
cal 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 “do-
mesticate” the political system of socialism, but
on the other hand also culturally adapt them-
selves 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 chang-
es could not be realized. People have not auto-
matically “thrown out” or exchanged their pre-
vious cultural conceptions, categories and strat-
egies 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 Kara-dy and John Borneman describe – from different points of view – those 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.

References


