



PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Shadow Elite

How the Study of Post-Communist Societies Illuminates US Power Structures

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The anthropological study of communist and post-communist societies is excellent preparation for exploring issues of power, influence and governing in the United States today. This theme underlies my new book *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*, from Basic Books. I have come to this conclusion having turned much of my energy homeward after spending the better part of three decades studying first how people circumvented communism and then how players positioned themselves to wield power and influence when it was coming undone. I have concluded that an ethnographic focus is indispensable to sorting out power and influence amid transforming federal governance in the United States, not only under change-of-system conditions such as those found in transitional eastern Europe.

What happened there is clear: when a centrally planned state that had owned virtually all the property, companies and wealth breaks down (and no authoritarian stand-in is put in its place), a network-based mode of governing and business arises to replace it. In the 1990s, when command systems unraveled and informal maneuvering was given free reign, self-enfranchising networks and groups, schooled in circumventing bureaucracy, mobilized themselves. They worked the state-private nexus to secure the resources and privileges necessary to further their own goals. These networks and groups, which cannot be reduced to “lobbyists” or “interest groups,” have been

variously described as “institutional nomads,” “restructuring networks,” “unruly coalitions” and “clans” by Polish, Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian and American ethnographers. The analysts have unpacked the indistinguishable government, business, media and nongovernmental affiliations and interests embodied by key policy- and opinion-makers and thereby unlocked key

drivers of power and influence in the region.

My observation of institutional nomadic groups and clans in Poland in the 1990s helped me theorize about “flex nets”—a new breed of influencers I have identified in the US and globally. For instance, the flex net that I call the “Neocon core,” a tight-knit dozen or so players (around Richard Perle) who have been working together for 30 years to remake US foreign policy according to their own vision, helped take the United States to war in Iraq through coordinated efforts via their state-private network. Their success in influencing foreign policy over three decades, I argue, is due substantially to their pioneering modus operandi, especially their skill at supplanting official processes and information. Like members of nomadic groups and clans, members of the Neocon core and other flex nets operate at the interstices of official and private power and test both the rules of the state (of accountability) and of the market (of competition).

Though the context in which flex nets operate in the United States is, of course, vastly different from eastern Europe, changes in US federal government today provide increased opportunities for such ready-made networks of actors

with their own private agendas to strategically place their people both in and outside government—co-opting policy portfolios and extinguishing meaningful oversight. Today, governance is marked by a great upsurge in contracting out crucial government functions; growth in numbers and importance of quasi-government advisory boards and commissions; movement of information and expertise to the private sector; and the interdependency of state and private power. The financial crisis has intensified this interdependency, with financial and political policy deciders “coinciding” at the highest echelons of power. As new institutional forms of governing join the state and the private, permeating virtually all arenas of government, the new players of power and influence flout once-sacrosanct boundaries between state and private to operate beyond the reach of government monitors and the input of publics.

The ethnographic sensibility that enabled scholars of communist and post-communist

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societies to deal with the complexity, ambiguity and messiness of political and policy processes is ideally suited to examine the interactions between public policy and private interests and the mixing of state, nongovernmental, and business forms that are increasingly prevalent in the United States and around the world. By focusing on players and their networks as drivers of governing and policy decisions, these ethnographers have laid the groundwork for badly needed critiques of social science categories such as “state” versus “private,” “top-down versus bottom-up,” and “centralized” versus “decentralized.” They have provided a basis for reexamining conventional models that guide so much thinking about politics, policy and power, and yet obfuscate, rather than illuminate, the real system of power and influence.

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Assault on the Hawaiian Nation

A Twenty-First Century Colonial Land Grab

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On October 27, 2009, the Supreme Court of Hawai'i dismissed the last standing plaintiff in the massive land case *Office of Hawaiian Affairs, et al v State of Hawai'i*—Jon Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio—by declaring that his claims were not “ripe for adjudication,” vacating the circuit court's January 31, 2003 judgment. Osorio along with

three other individual Kanaka Maoli (indigenous Hawaiian) men—Pia Thomas Aluli, Charles Ka'ai'ai, and Keoki Maka Kamaka Ka'ili—and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, originally sued the executive branch of the state government in response to its attempts to sell some of the 1.6 million acres of land that the state considers public. These lands were claimed by the US government following the illegal overthrow of the legitimate Hawaiian monarchy under

Queen Lili'uokalani in 1893. Through a Joint Congressional Resolution passed in 1898, the US government unilaterally annexed the Hawaiian Islands and accepted these stolen lands from the Republic of Hawai'i—an entity formed in 1894 by those who overthrew the Kingdom.

In this lawsuit the Hawai'i State Supreme Court at first unanimously ruled that the state must keep the land trust intact until Kanaka Maoli claims to these lands were settled. The court made that original ruling based on the 1993 Congressional Apology to the Hawaiian people, in which Congress acknowledged and

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