

## BOOK REVIEW

### Social Anthropology

HANN, C.M. *The skeleton at the feast: contributions to East European anthropology* (CSAC Monogr. 9). xviii, 250 pp., illus., maps, tables, bibliogr. Canterbury: Centre for Social Anthropology & Computing, 1995

The skeleton at the feast is an eclectic collection. Hann relates key findings in the anthropology of Eastern Europe and also contributes to some crucial issues confronting anthropology. The book should be read both by anthropologists grappling with the discipline and by non-anthropologists engaged in political-economic study of the region.

Using Hann's own fieldwork in Hungarian and Polish villages as a point of departure, Part 1 of *The skeleton at the feast* nicely incorporates much work by those anthropologists who ventured beyond the discipline's geographic traditions but explored its traditional topics: peasantries, religion and ritual, ethnicity and nationalism, and kinship and the family. Hann does not claim a 'single unifying theme' but rather an approach emphasizing 'the importance of economic and political factors for understanding social and cultural life in this region' (p. xi).

In the Polish village he studied, for example, Hann heard Catholic priests relate the sanctity of family life to the sanctity of small private plots. The larger theme, of course, is that Poland generally avoided collectivization and its Church often served as an effective counterweight to state policies.

Under communism the most powerful ritual symbols, Hann argues, were those that linked traditional forms of religion to the nation. Economic and political factors also shaped how people constructed their identities. While some anthropologists found that collectivization weakened the unity of the local community, others showed how people faced with dislocation found solace in local identities. Ethnic issues are compelling in Eastern Europe, especially because the region has nearly three times as many ethnic groups as Western Europe.

I found Hann's chapter on kinship and the family to be least satisfying. By taking a traditional anthropological approach with a focus on descent and lineage systems, he largely overlooks critical social organizational questions and contributions on households and the systems of exchange enveloping and extending out from the family. But often under socialism, 'the family' was, practically, the people that one could count on to exchange and share scarce goods and services. Here a clear-eyed economic anthropological approach would have contributed more to Hann's thesis about how economic and political factors affected social and cultural life, in this case, the family.

Throughout the book, Hann shows how anthropological analyses should inform non-anthropologists studying political and economic developments in Eastern Europe. For Western observers, the boundaries of the region often have fluctuated but Eastern Europe has long been seen as the generalized 'Other'. This 'Other' is consistently pejorative, the image of mafia having replaced that of iron curtain in the transitional years. Given the varied experience of Eastern Europeans over time and place, Hann is rightly sceptical of existing attempts to outline a general model of socialism.

In Part 2 of *The skeleton at the feast*, Hann draws on his field experience to disparage the recent trend in which anthropologists substitute 'introspection' for analysis of the people they allegedly are studying. Anthropologists 'will not impress either colleagues in other disciplines or wider audiences if they become preoccupied with their personal narratives' (p. 179), he says -- a judgement indeed worthy of disciplinary soul searching. Also astute are Hann's assessments of attempts to introduce privatization and free markets in Hungary and his analysis of East-West encounters under the rubric of Western assistance. 'Much of this "assistance"', Hann observes, 'has infuriated Eastern Europeans, particularly when the actual moneys have been channelled to firms of western accountants and assorted "consultants" entirely lacking local knowledge' (p. 205).

Hann's book demonstrates why the voices of anthropologists should be heard by policymakers and 'alongside the "strong" languages of other disciplines such as economics and political science' (p. 206). I highly recommend *The skeleton at the feast* to non-anthropologists interested in Eastern Europe and to anthropologists generally.

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