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BOOK REVIEW

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Politics and the environment in Eastern Europe

edited by Eszter Krasznai Kovács, Cambridge, UK: OpenBook Publishers, 2021, 342 pp., £33.95 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-80064-133-4; £25.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-80064-132-7; £00.00 (open access eBook PDF), ISBN: 978-1-80064-134-1; <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0244>

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This critically engaged volume on politics and the environment in Eastern Europe (EE) carries “the commitment to gather together a group of scholars *from* the region, to write *about* and *for* this region first and foremost, but also with the intention to reach colleagues and friends *beyond* it, in the hopes that the issues presented here resonate with other places” (312, emphasis in the original text). This is an important statement which I wish to briefly unpack.

Being *from* the region in order to write *about* and *for* the region marks an engaged view on the ethics of representation and the authors’ quest to forward local understandings on the issues examined. The ethics of representation is never taken for granted and always critically reflected upon across the book’s Introduction (by the editor), the 12 chapters, and the contributors’ collective Concluding Thoughts. The EE countries represented in the empirical analyses are rather few (i.e. the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia). However, the fact that most countries feature in multiple chapters essentially allows building deep and nuanced accounts by country and of the region.

Reaching *beyond* the region would be well deserved as this volume is not only theoretically sophisticated in its promotion of the “‘political ecology’ approach, where nature and ecology are understood to be produced through politics, culture and history, and the political is understood as

both made through the material environment and as having environmental consequences” (1), but each chapter makes its own refined theoretical contribution. It deserves reaching *beyond* the region also because tackling environmental issues may have reached the public agenda, at least discursively, but the politics of environmental justice continue to remain obfuscated – but not in this volume, which puts the question of environmental justice at its core.

The volume is organized in three parts. Following the introduction, Part One focuses on the institutional level of civic action or civil society. Chapter 1 (by Kovács and Pataki) examines the political drive of the Orban regime that has dismantled the environmental sector in Hungary by discrediting prominent individuals, delegitimizing activist organizations or dismantling state departments, including research centers. Chapter 2 (by Novák) and Chapter 3 (by Černík) bring more optimistic perspectives: Novák presents the making of the environmental movements through historic cycles of (de)-radicalization in the Czech Republic over the last four decades, their unfolding being connected to the broader political, ideological and cultural conditions. Černík documents the last, current cycle of radicalization of environmental protests in the Czech Republic and Poland, including through deliberation across international networks of activists and activist organizations. Chapter 4 (by Hrczkova) examines a case of ‘successful’ green communing of a derelict plot in the prime location of central Warsaw, defended against planned, for-profit enclosure. While the fragility of environmental activist action against neo-liberal politics is obvious across these chapters, and particularly bleak in the case of Hungary, the optimist may see grounds for hope at least for the growth of a more participatory democracy in EE if not for legitimizing environmental protection over economic development.

Part Two focuses on case-studies of nationalistic sentiment that link ‘nature’ to ‘blood’ and ‘soul’, commonly coalescing around rightwing politics and rightwing ecologism (but there is no simple affiliation between the two, we are told). Chapter 5 (by Lubarda) takes us to the complicated relationship between rightwing politics (populist-right and far-right), nationalist ideologies and the discursive privileging of the local people and environment in Poland while Chapter 6 (by Coțofană) substantiates a similar link in Romania through the magical, xenophobic power of the mountain protecting ‘the locals’ and punishing ‘foreign intruders’. Chapter 7 (by Püsök) offers a finely grained (hi)story of dwelling in a Romanian mining village during pre-socialist, socialist and post-socialist times, unearthing with exceptional linguistic sensitivity the historic relationship between people, nature and *ore* in a context of geographic marginality and

neglect by the state. While populist rhetoric has gained political power on the back of nationalist sentiments stemming from dispossession and abandonment, there may also be some room for optimism from this rightwing emphasis on the local, which may become “potentially progressive and desirable” (124).

Across five chapters, Part Three focuses on the ways of doing things at the local scale, evidencing the conflict between top-down interventionist action (of the supra-/national state, western ideas and organizations) and local norms and values. Chapter 8 (by Iordăchescu) on the “ongoing establishment of a private wilderness reserve in the Southern Carpathians in Romania” (187) makes a brilliant analysis and a truly bleak reading. He demonstrates that internationally-driven conservationism “reinforces unjust dependencies and new forms of accumulation as wild nature becomes an environmental fix” (187). The conservationist mechanism of acquiring cheap land in EE – and indeed ‘cheapening’ the land with the view of buying – essentially creates neo-liberal enclosures, dispossessing communities of traditional foraging and roaming rights. In the same vein, Chapter 9 (by Brawner) tells the story of the forced transformation of the Tokaj wine-making practices in Hungary in order to suit the ‘Western’ taste and to access international markets. Examining the food system of the peasant agrarian economy, Chapter 10 (by Blumberg) contests the assumed ‘backwardness’, ‘inferiority’ or ‘otherness’ of EE’s versus western ideas and realities while recognizing the desirability but also the limitations of alternative food networks. Chapter 11 (by Dikovic) argues that social norms and discourses of ‘hard work’, ‘dignity’ and farmers’ subjective connection to land have produced ‘endogenous rural development driven by local values’ in Serbia, which “in combination with favourable market incentives, may achieve wider effects” (262). Finally, Chapter 12 (by Mihalovics and Fehér) “discusses the structural and personal inequalities that set some people and projects up for failure in rural Hungary” (15). While this story of failure is disheartening, the chapter reflects on the ethical question of representation, advancing an original conversational approach between the academic (Mihalovics) and the informer (Fehér) that accommodates dissent and sharing authorship.

The volume closes with collective Concluding Thoughts. This is a truly pessimist – albeit perhaps realist – account of the cultural peripheralization of the EE region under hegemonic Western thought/dogma be it in the public, political or scholarly arena. The collective proposes ‘decolonizing knowledge’ so that scholars *from* the region write critically *about* and *for* the

region. I agree yet I cannot but observe that only six of the 13 authors lived and worked in the EE at the time of writing, a geopolitical outcome of the price of knowledge.

As I have just returned to Romania after 16 years' academic life in the UK, I have encountered first hand some of the EE realities examined in this book: the Tokay wine I used to love is nowhere to be seen; private enclosures closed off the mountain footpaths I knew; the commodification of nature led to gentrified tourism; green space has but disappeared in my city; rural poverty strives; the pursuit of environmental wilderness brought bears in villages and cities. But I remain hopeful. If civil society and protests were quasi non-existent when I left (Soaita and Wind 2020), collective voices can now be heard, including but not most potently on environmental matters. Just as this book has so thoroughly demonstrated, social movements and local protests are highly heterogeneous in terms of global-to-local scale, left-to-right ideologies, vertical or horizontal organization, yet they have started to form a deliberative arena that may potentially (yet not necessarily) imagine other than neoliberal futures.

Given its theoretical and empirical depth, this book makes an essential read to all (early/advanced career) scholars interested in critically engaged and non-essentialist understandings of social movements and protests, whether or not related to the environment, whether or not situated in the EE region. The Open Access eBook enhances its reach to scholars' of the Majority World in a true gesture of environmental and social justice.

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