

Cosmologies of Suffering: Post-Communist Transformation, Sacral Communication, and Healing

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In the editors' preface, it is stated that the book is a result of cooperation between members of the *Sacral Healing and Communication* network belonging to the EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists), a group of anthropologists interested in medical anthropology and sacrality that began its activities in 2003. A conference in Hungary at the Balaton Lake crowned their work in 2005. EASA accepted the network *Sacral Healing and Communication* network as one of its official networks in 2007. While reading this insightful book edited by Agita Lüse and Imre Lázár, one becomes convinced how important the biennial conferences of the EASA truly are and how collaboration established through this huge organization of anthropologists can result in marvelous publications in the domain of medical anthropology and religion.

The title of the book comes from, as Laszlo Kürti who wrote the foreword of this volume states, two basic concepts in (medical) anthropology: cosmologies and suffering. These are elaborated in ten chapters or articles, offering specific ethnographical settings from Russia to Croatia, across Hungary to Slovenia, Poland and Zimbabwe. As the two commentators of the book – Iain Edgar from the University of Durham and Krisztina Fehérváry from the University of Michigan – explain (on the cover of the book), the linking leitmotif of this joint publication is the so-called 'Post-Soviet' societies which are dealing, in various ways, with the harsh realities facing social, political and economic transitional states. The choice of fieldworks reunited in this book comes from, as the editors state, "societies emerging from the social and political upheaval accompanying the so-called post-socialist transition in the former Soviet-bloc countries of Central and Eastern Europe" (p. 1). The introduction written by the editors offers a fresh approach to the sci-

entific examination of different worldviews and diverse social settings. This scientific production also complements earlier anthropological studies exploring the themes of suffering, cosmologies in a broader meaning, and medical treatments or other productions relating to state of mind and spirituality. From the standpoint of medical anthropology, the methodological model offered by the editors has the goal of provoking deliberation about bodily suffering and those on other levels of being for the purposes of discovering concealed cosmological theories, inner (social) laws and the thinking patterns of diverse societies. When defining one of the basic concepts of the volume, the western solipsism of 'cosmology' is challenged as individuals and their societies mobilize resources to communicate, to grasp the 'higher forces' of their existence, developing new thinking patterns and practices.

The nine contributors to this volume provide concrete examples revealing specific ethnographical settings, and underlining the connection and the importance of the links between physical and spiritual models of human condition(s). For this purpose, the so called 'Post-Soviet', or rather the 'post-communist' countries have provided over the past two decades – and indeed are still providing – an in vivo laboratory where rapid social changes, and collective and individual transformations are felt as vivid and tangible. The aim is to uphold the awareness, as the editors underline, that suffering may be construed as a social production transecting individual and collective aptitudes to steer social conduct and reality-representations (p. 27-28) – no matter whether culturally appreciated, expectant or penalized – as is well demonstrated by the choice of the articles and topics elaborated in them.

From a diachronic perspective, this book filled a gap which was already palpable through the 90s in the field of medical anthropological literature: for the seemingly stable and pre-established conditions of the social arena and the fields of political and economic settings underwent tremendous changes which turned a number of societies into 'transitional states'. The book's timing was apposite as an interpretation of the events which shaped the 90s and are still constructing social realities across Europe and the world is much needed in order to fill the voids in understanding the human condition in general. This collection of case-studies addresses the relationship between suffering and the fall of soviet-style state-socialism, in which the term 'post-communist' society is more broadly employed to denote societies that come in the wake of "state imposed policies rather than socialism as political system" (p. xi Editor's preface). The reason why the cases from these societies were taken under the magnifying glass of anthropological interest is the paradoxical permanence of the state of 'transition' which had lasted before the publishing of the book for more than a decade and in which the swift change of circumstances has caused reactions interpreted as suffering on an individual level and even more visibly so on the social body as a whole. Each case examined in

the collection centers on a different ethnographic setting (Hungary, Poland, Zimbabwe, Croatia, Russia, Slovenia), however, the differences and similarities in culturally constructed and rationalized complexes of suffering are staggeringly similar. As responses to the omnipresent suffering in the human condition, alternative religious and medical practices, as well as the world views they imply, are still being constructed and (re)shaped. Suffering seems to be an unavoidable by-product of the economic, social and political changes which were examined as cases in every chapter of this book.

The task undertaken by the editors was to place into the focus of anthropological reflection the concepts of individual suffering and suffering felt at a social level through specific perceptions of reality drawn from the contexts of sacrality, religion and healing. In their effort to place these concepts in an anthropological frame, the editors proposed as a first step of analysis a methodological approach to the interconnection between the themes of suffering, cosmologies and other related anthropological concepts.

Several concepts, such as 'cosmologies', 'nature' and 'culture' and 'religion,' are closely examined by the contributors of the collection in which a pertinent place is given to the concept of human distress. Suffering is not merely an economic or bodily category in which loss, misery, illness and poverty are its metonymical extensions: suffering is culturally and socially valued, measured, expressed, negotiated and even prohibited. It can also empower the individual and the group and permit a reinvention of identities. A structural approach of examining cosmological structures and their relations in the creation of the symbolic meanings of the human condition(s) in which suffering is an ever-present leitmotif is proposed as an autonomous category of thought. In the domain of medical anthropology, the quest for the meaning of bodily and social suffering still remains to be explored and this book offers a significant step in the anthropological effort to understand concepts which are often subordinated to more popular classifications that are 'easy to think with'. The alternative healing practices which abundantly resurged after the fall of communism in these societies indicated a necessity to reposition individuals in a newly organized system in which human beings are not just social actors of (dysfunctional) societies in which liberties were carefully displayed and therefore constrained, but an active part of a greater, universal order, in which everything was theoretically possible, while in reality nothing truly was. Religion and religiousness came first as a mechanism of claiming back lost values and truths. Other forms of inner and outer displays of quests of spirituality broke through as well. In this sense, spirituality, as the editors propose, might be a universal answer and a coping-mechanism when facing social injustices, uncertainties and individual and collective sufferings.

The sacral and religious practices, alternative medical practices and New Age movements can be interpreted as ways of coping in a Geertzian manner to regain

some sort of control – which it is felt has been lost in the past – a control over individual and social realities, over a world which seems to be in chaos. The social arena becomes a universe in which one suffers and copes against it/with it: new realities are desperately shaped and (re)constructed. Change is inevitable – how to cope with it remains a choice, as the case studies reaffirm.

The motif of suffering is explored by the authors and editors with much creativity as an unavoidable fact of human existence. The meanings which are administered to the changes and the felt uncertainties caused by it on the personal and social level are fundamental semiotic processes. One symbolical context is exchanged for another notion, and uncertainty is installed (and with it suffering): therefore, phenomena declared as 'past' and/or 'superstitions' or alternative explanations of truths (re)emerge as substitute-cosmologies, parallel to hegemonic, mainstream realities. These substitute-cosmologies are the litmus-paper for all changes in society, as the case-studies also prove.

The revitalization of myths and revival of (old) beliefs (such as, for example, shamanism, religious processions, etc.) are just one way of interpreting coping with uncertainties. The editors call upon the scrutiny of other possible paradigms, such as ontology and metaphysics in the domain of medical anthropology. The supranatural cannot be discredited just as a simple survival technique; it has a constructive role in the shaping of human understanding of the world and the cosmos, in which meanings are not randomly attributed. The analysis of the supranatural underlines the necessity to examine further individual and social realities. Mysticism as a response to social suffering and shaping of diverse modes of representativeness and truths is an essential area for study in medical anthropology; therefore sacral cosmologies and communication are a necessity for the anthropological revision of various truths. The decreased capability of individuals and groups to navigate in culturally constructed universes in which suffering is an overwhelming theme pushes toward a reinvention of personal and social solutions which are often 'imports', introductions from other cultural settings, but which nevertheless prove to be functional. The foreign or once lost, forgotten truths are (re)employed, negotiated and lived.

When the social realities of human existences and universes undergo change, beside economic flashbacks, it is the health of an individual and simultaneously the health of a society – the social body – that are the first fields in which cosmological 'beingness' have to be sociologically examined, because these are the moments in which they are reinterpreted and re-negotiated. For this reason, this book, although published a half decade ago, has lost none of its pertinence for a fuller understanding of 'Post-Soviet' universes. It remains a must read for all anthropologists examining universes of suffering, in which coping with uncertainties and transformations of beliefs, practices and worldviews remain keywords.

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