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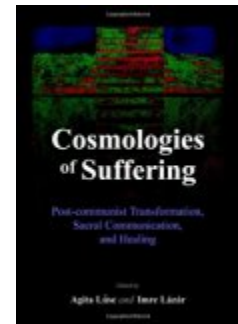
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Agita Lūse, Imre Lazar, eds. *Cosmologies of Suffering: Post-communist Transformation, Sacral Communication, and Healing*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. xvi + 244 pp. \$69.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84718-258-6.

Reviewed by Jill Owczarzak (Medical College of Wisconsin)

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Social Suffering and Healing in Post-socialist Eastern Europe

The collapse of socialism in eastern Europe, and the social and political upheavals that followed, brought economic, physical, and emotional suffering to the people of the region. Widespread unemployment, the whittling away of the social safety net, and the emergence of new and murky channels of social and political influence converged to create generalized senses of loss, exploitation, and anxiety. While the collapse of socialism eliminated many of the systems that had been in place to address social and physical needs, it also opened the region to both repressed historical religious and cultural practices, and international practices and ideas. The essays collected in *Cosmologies of Suffering* seek to shed light on the healing practices and belief systems that have emerged in post-socialist eastern Europe to combat social, physical, and emotional suffering that resulted from these sweeping changes.

In their introduction, the editors theoretically position the collected essays within the framework of medical anthropology. They argue that forms of suffering with diverse origins (moral, interpersonal, sociopolitical, and biomedical, for example) have physical consequences. In turn, the healing methods mobilized to address these origins extend beyond traditional biomedical approaches to include spiritual and shamanic healing, appeals to cosmic forces, invocations of myth, and new forms of psychotherapy (e.g., hypnosis). The nature of suffering described by the authors (as encompassing the body, the psyche, and the community) requires these new modes of

healing. They argue against the “Standard Social Science Model” of health and healing to allow for full consideration of “sacral communication,” or the “effort to mobilize transcendental resources to gain back control over personal reality transformed by enormous supranational economic and political forces” (p. 5). They employ the lens of sacral communication as healing to lend legitimacy to the realities of both the suffering and ways of curing that their informants practice and describe.

The essays hail from throughout the region, including Russia (Lindquist, Barchunova), Romania (Keszeg), Poland (Hall, Rakowski), Slovenia (Potrata), Hungary (Lázár), Croatia (Schäuble), and Zimbabwe (Rödlach). The authors argue for the inclusion of Rödlach’s piece on HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe based on its political history modeled on Communist parties. However, given that no other essays from outside eastern Europe were included, and that Zimbabwe’s social, economic, cultural, and political histories diverge significantly from the socialist and post-socialist context in central and eastern Europe, the chapter seems misplaced, despite topical and thematic overlap with the other essays. Thematically, the essays describe three overlapping modes of healing: the reemergence of cosmologies marginalized under state socialism (Lindquist, Barchunova, Keszeg); the increasing popularity of New Age practices (Potrata, Hall); and the invocation of myths (Rödlach, Lázár, Rakowski, Schäuble).

These essays offer a valuable contribution to the ethnography of eastern Europe, particularly because the majority of the authors are “native anthropologists.” The dearth of scholars *from* the region writing *about* the region has been a glaring gap in our understanding of the region. The essays are also useful for thinking about post-socialist transformation and its effects beyond the focus of traditional “transitology” studies, which tend to primarily focus on political and economic change and the elite-level social actors involved. The essays in *Cosmologies of Suffering* shift the focus to the embodied consequences of national and international forces of change. Rakowski’s article on the aftershocks of the mining industry’s collapse in southwest Poland, for example, vividly describes the dismantling of the physical environment through the closing of the mines and the practice of salvaging from the mines that former miners have employed as a form of survival. The resultant sense of disintegration, loss, danger, and instability has permeated individual psychology and the collective sense of well-being. Rakowski argues that one of the only ways of managing in this context of decline and instability are attempts to “grab the world and get it under control” (p. 200), primarily through dismantling their physical world themselves. In contrast to this pervasive loss that socialism’s decline brought to the mining sector of Poland’s economy, Lindquist’s essay reveals an instance in which postsocialism has brought new possibilities of social healing, in this case, through the reemergence of shaman-guided death rituals. Likewise, Lázár’s essay il-

lustrates the ways in which recently accessible forms of New Age spirituality and healing in post-socialist Hungary are integrated with Hungarian myths to heal both personal and collective histories of trauma.

Despite these important contributions, the essays collected in *Cosmologies of Suffering* leave many questions regarding the emergence of new forms of healing in the post-socialist context unanswered. First, this volume does not make connections to research done on similar topics in other regions, or illustrate the ways in which the post-socialist context is unique in the opportunities for new healing practices that it presents. In their introduction, the authors attempt to link suffering on multiple levels, and draw connections between physical suffering and broad forces of social, economic, and political change. However, the utility of this volume is also limited by the lack of contextualization for these new systems of healing within a broader framework of decreased access to healthcare, or increased morbidity and mortality. That is, the essays in this volume do not go far enough to explore changes in the social safety nets, and the implications of their disintegration for health and healing on a broader scale. Moreover, the articles do not address questions of how widely used these new systems of healing or interpretations of suffering are. With clearer exploration of the broader context in which these new systems of healing develop, the direction of research undertaken by these authors could make an important contribution not only to medical anthropology but to post-socialist studies as well.

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