

***Postcommunism from Within: Social Justice, Mobilization and Hegemony.* Edited by Jan Kubík and Amy Linch. New York: New York University Press, 2013. Viii, 440 pp. Illustrations. \$40.50, hard bound.**

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Context matters. The principle of *contextual holism* coined by Jan Kubík lies at the core of the collection of essays *Postcommunism From Within: Social Justice, Mobilization, and Hegemony*. Contextual holism refers to “the situated nature of human action and perception” (24). Compared to most of the previous studies that adopted a binary approach either supporting or critiquing the roles of democracy, civil society, and liberal reforms in post-communist countries, this book challenges the very analytical and methodological frameworks conventionally used in analyses of the region and warns against a limited empirical inquiry. The authors deconstruct the normative assumptions linking democratization to justice, mobilization, and hegemony arguing for a more nuanced micro-level analysis of the region. Was the degree of expanded opportunities the same across different post-communist countries and their citizens? Did the citizens have a say in the development path that their country took? What was the impact of global institutions on the local practices? These questions are intended to disrupt our knowledge of post-communist socioeconomic and political history.

The book is built around four thematic blocks moving from the discussion of the general approaches to post-communism to the diverse accounts of gender, poverty, and corruption. By focusing on these topics the authors intend to step down “from the simplicity of a unitary category or concept” (123) rather than perpetuate the stabilized knowledge regimes. Jan Kubík sets the overall tone of the collection by questioning the homogeneity of the Western models and makes a strong case against transitology with its tendency to view the post-communist development as a straightforward and a linear process “from totalitarianism to democracy and from command economy to market economy” (32). In the same vein, Thomas C. Wolfe and John Pickles delve into the implications of a uni-dimensional understanding of neoliberalism and social justice. Invoking the Foucauldian theory of governmentality, the authors track how the notion of modernity manifested itself in different parts of the region and how the socialist and neoliberal projects created the specific conditions for knowledge production.

The authors of the section focusing on the gendered aspects of post-communism situate women’s rights in terms of local activism highlighting “diverse and innovative nature of mobilizing practices” (169). Joanna Regulska and Magdalena Grabowska question the uniformity of the phenomenon *gender activism* as it applies to Eastern Europe and reject the Western discourse of gender equality as the only kind of gender mobilizing project there can be in the region. The sites of women’s activism are multiple and often contradictory, and none of them have inherent value associated with them. Along with the benefits of the neoliberal version of activism, there has been de-radicalization of the movement’s agenda accompanied by the erasure of differences along the race, class, ethnic, and other identity lines. Laura Lovin foregrounds the danger of focusing on NGOs as the only manifestation of the movement’s existence and evokes the materiality of the everyday lives of the Romanian women rather than the abstract and normative

notions of unity and autonomy as a starting point for women's activism. Medea Badashvili reminds us that even though the issues of women have been re-articulated since the Soviet times, the grip of the institutionalized feminism (that adopts women's rights conventions but fails to implement them) is still very strong, as the example of Georgia demonstrates. Ultimately, the assumption that mobilization has a predetermined set of attributes does not apply to Eastern Europe with its "complex, changing web of diverse gender ideologies, market practices, institutional power relationships, resource distribution networks, and elite politics" (174).

Poverty too has been viewed through the prism of justice, mobilization, and hegemony with emphasis being on the blurry economic distinctions between neoliberal and patrimonial regimes, the uneven effects of economic reforms (Ivan Szelenyi and Katarzyna Wilk), and the social exclusion of Roma people (Alina Vamanu and Iulian Vamanu) that elucidates the prominent role of ethno-nationalism in the transformation process.

The discussion of corruption does not fall under the category of the traditional economic study but rather follows the general thread of the book's argument. By deconstructing corruption as "informal practices" Alena V. Ledeneva dispels the myth about "the existence of a rational-legal system of rule that clearly distinguishes public and private realms" (299). The existing measurements of corruption have faced the issues of validity and reliability, necessitating a return to basics, i.e., a clearer definition. Be it healthcare or public procurement, both Rasma Karklins and Ase Berit Grodeland identify different levels of informal payments characterizing some of them as a form of social protest.

What I felt was missing in this theoretically innovative collection was a deeper engagement with the methodological implications of the revisited analytical frameworks. Even though Kubik discusses "ethnographic sensibility" (63) and the overall importance of relying on anthropological methods to achieve contextual holism, the complexities of developing and applying a method appropriate to the specific locality and topic as well as the ethical dilemmas of research in post-communist countries have been left unaddressed.

The consistency of the argument unfolding across the range of topics attributes a sense of coherence to this collection. This volume presents an impressive body of work that not only recognizes the importance of analyzing the region on its own terms locating it historically, politically, culturally, and socially, but also encourages scholars to engage in reflexive research, a reminder that scholars from other fields might also appreciate. To push and disrupt the elusive boundaries further, more research exploring the intersectional nature of gender, ethnicity, poverty, and nationalism is needed.